

# THE LOGOS CONCEPT

A Critical Monograph on John 1:1  
Abridged by the Author

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"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The title Logos was the chief theological term descriptive of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, which was applied in the full-flowered Christology of the ancient church, being in a very distinct sense the basic content and starting-point of the doctrine of Christ. And yet Biblically this title is found only in the Johannine group of New Testament writings; here in John 1:1, in I John 1:1, and in Revelation 19:13. Since John presents Christ as Logos introductory to his Gospel, he reveals that this title is convenient and, more than that, absolutely essential to a proper understanding of the relationship between the pre-existent Son of God and the historically-manifested divine revelation in the human life of Jesus. With stately simplicity John introduces the Lord Jesus Christ out of the eternal ages, representing Him not only as the focal point of history, but also as the expansion of history in relation to creation, preservation, and revelation in the world.

Picture yourself as a Jewish Christian familiar with the Book of Beginnings in the Septuagint version. It begins, en arche, just as in the opening words of John's Gospel. This would suggest John's acquaintance with the Old Testament in Greek, as well as a conscious effort on his part, by inspiration, to take this appropriate and stimulating concept and use it to give a new genesis account, now laid bare in conformity with the One Who manifested revelation in its several forms. This leads us to several very important questions: What did John mean when he applied this title to Christ? (And he clearly did so, as in John 1:14-18.) And since the idea of the Logos was a widespread concept in the ancient world, whence was the origin of this well-known linguistic expression, and what of its function in earlier usage?

Therefore it will be our task to trace the Logos concept in most of its forms in its historical development; then to ascertain the extent and the effects of this concept in its several distinct areas upon John's identification of the Logos; and finally, to seek to arrive at various distinctions and syntheses relative to the problem. Once this has been accomplished, a brief exegesis of the verse itself will be undertaken, on the basis of the familiar structural analysis.

## VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE JOHANNINE SOURCE

1. The Philosophical Logos Concept. The Hellenic concept of the Logos was a doctrine of the Logos as the Divine Reason: the Logos was the rational principle or impersonal energy which was responsible for the founding and organization of the world. Thus the Logos was an abstraction, not an hypostasis (a transliteration of the Greek hypostasis, "substance," hereafter denoting a real personal subsistence or person).

2. The Pagan Gnostic Concept. This view, held by Bultmann, is that the Logos was a "mythological intermediary being" between God and man. Here is an approach to the Docetic heresy in that this intermediary being at one time even became man, and saved the world by saving himself.

3. The Hebrew "Word" Source. This is the view that the theological usage of the term Logos is derived directly either from the true Old Testament concept of the dēbhar Jahweh, or the Palestinian Aramaic Memra, in which the outward dynamic expression of the Word was the chief feature. Of course, we must distinguish between inspired and uninspired literature, but in both cases the same descriptive term "Word" was used as active, instrumental, creative, personal, and revelatory in function.

4. The Philonian Source. In short, Philo's system provided that since God was so far above the realm of creation, His contact with the world could only have been through the medium of intermediate powers, which, for Philo, became personalized when he replaced the Platonic term "Ideas" with the Old Testament term "the Word of God," using Logos as the Greek equivalent of that Scriptural form.

5. The "Special Guidance of the Spirit" View. Here is an opinion which holds that it is useless to inquire as to the origin of this idea in the mind of John; we really have little to do with the origin of the term; for if we believe that John was one of those men who had the special guidance of the Spirit, then the term Logos is applied to Christ by God Himself, and it becomes us only to inquire why it is so applied to Him.

6. The Hebrew "Wisdom" Source. J. Rendel Harris takes the prologue of John directly back to the Wisdom references in Old Testament literature. It is asserted that there is a connection between the Logos and the Sophia which makes them practically interchangeable. Proverbs 8:22-23 sets the stage for this linkage, going on to elaborate on the activity of this "Wisdom," which is parallel in several ways to the Old Testament concept of the creative Word, becoming in later Judaism an intermediary personification, a Divine hypostasis.

## THE HISTORICO-LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

Since the idea of the Logos was a concept of widespread usage in oriental-Semitic and Greek literature both before and contemporaneous with Christianity, it is not only profitable, but essential for us to examine some of the actual material which presents the various facets of the Logos concept. Of course, the very archaic forms must be treated as ultimate sources which hark back to revelation at creation, which have become corrupted due to the depravity of human nature, but which also have survived in one form or another, finally arriving at the true, though perhaps incomplete doctrine of the Creative Word in the Old Testament, and at last, the perfect realization of this doctrine in the identification made by John: "In the beginning was the Word."

Some of the earliest historical notices that we have come from Egypt, the "Gift of the Nile," which in turn became one of the two cradles of civilization. In the Egyptian cosmogony the divine

creative activity was predominant in fashioning the gods and the elements of heaven and earth according to divine thought and the sacred oracle. Atum, or Ptah, or Thoth (according to historical period and geographical location) became the "heart and tongue" of the council of the gods, and the utterance of the thought in the form of a divine fiat brought forth the world. From the Memphite theology comes this illustrative text:

Ptah the Great, that is, the heart and tongue of the Ennead; [Ptah] . . . who gave birth to gods; . . . There came into being as the heart and there came into being as the tongue (something) in the form of Atum. The mighty Great One is Ptah, who transmitted [life] to all gods, as well as (to) their ka's through this heart, by which Horus became Ptah, and through this tongue, by which Thoth became Ptah. . . . And so Ptah was satisfied (or, "rested"), after he had made everything, as well as all the divine order.<sup>1</sup>

Quite naturally, creation stories such as this one offer divergences due to locality and time-sequence, but the patterns and results are practically the same throughout, although the methodological symbolisms tend to vary.

This concept is more forcefully presented in Sumero-Babylonian thought in the form of poetry which represented the word of the god as a powerful, dynamic figure, the extension of the divine energy in the realm of creation and earthly affairs. All that the creating deity had to do was to lay his plans, utter the word, and pronounce the name.<sup>2</sup> An Akkadian hymn to the moon-god Sin portrays the dynamistic aspect of this concept in Mesopotamia:

- Thou! When thy word is pronounced in heaven the  
Igigi prostrate themselves.
- Thou! When thy word is pronounced on earth the  
Anunnaki kiss the ground.
- Thou! When thy word drifts along in heaven like  
the wind it makes rich the feeding and  
drinking of the land.
- Thou! When thy word settles down on the earth  
green vegetation is produced.
- Thou! Thy word makes fat the sheepfold and stall;  
it makes living creatures widespread.
- Thou! Thy word causes truth and justice to be,  
so that the people speak the truth.
- Thou! Thy word which is far away in heaven, which  
is hidden in the earth is something no one sees.
- Thou! Who can comprehend thy word, who can equal it?<sup>3</sup>

Even apart from such poetic representations, the Sumerian and Akkadian terms *enem* and *awātu* give linguistic evidence of the dynamistic association of the "word."<sup>4</sup> The foregoing factors support our thesis that these ancient peoples conceived of the divine word under the image of physical-cosmic power, in which the voice of the god acts separately and distinctly as an entity possessing power. We take this as a strong indication that the "word" concept is basically of Near Eastern origin, an oriental development long before the Greeks launched into their more lauded speculations. Quite naturally, these pagan references indicate their own degeneration, since they

exhibit a vast difference from the Biblical usage, as will be shown presently. Our position on matters of common expression in the ancient Near East is that in the Biblical account the concept is preserved from error, a factor which does not militate against the statements of truth found in profane sources, but which does account for the differences.

In the Canaanite literature discovered at the ancient site of Ugarit the expressions are largely parallel to those of Mesopotamia. Baal, the storm-god, creates a thunderbolt to demonstrate his command to men when he re-institutes prosperity on the earth. He also reveals his word in the phenomena of nature--whisper of stones, rustling of trees, roar of the deep, and celestial music.<sup>5</sup> Baal gives forth his voice from the clouds when he furnishes rain in the form of a thunderstorm:

When Baal gives forth his holy voice,  
When Baal keeps discharging the utterance of his lips,  
his holy voice shakes the earth,  
...the mountains quake,  
a-quiver are...east and west,  
the high places of the earth rock.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of this usage is the poetic representation given to the voice and speech of Baal in the active fury of the re-instituted thunderstorm, showing the conceptual relationship, mythologically interpreted, between the emanation of Baal's voice and the active forces in nature. The word of Baal is not clearly hypostatized as a distinct conceptual being having personal existence, but this usage does show the concept of the divine word as more than mere conversation; it indicates a tendency of the Oriental mind to conceive of God's relation to the forces and personages of this world as being mediated through the almighty word of his voice.

The Hellenic doctrine of the Logos has been influential in both philosophical and Christian thought, for it deals with an attempt to explain and comprehend God's relation to the world, actually the basis of all religio-philosophical speculation. And speculation it was, for the Hellenic impartiality in combining a strong sense of reality with an equally strong power of abstraction enabled these Greeks at an early date to recognize their religious ideas for what they actually were: creations of artistic imagination. Thereby they set a world of ideas in place of a mythological world, a world built up by the strength of independent human thought, the Logos, which could claim to explain reality in a natural way. For Heraclitus, Logos meant a law, an impersonal law of change.<sup>7</sup> To Anaxagoras Logos was Mind, an impersonal moving principle.<sup>8</sup> Plato conceived the Logos as the intermediate Demiurge which God had to form matter from perfect Ideas.<sup>9</sup> For the Stoics, the intelligible structure of the universe was the Logos: active, creative world-reason, unfolding the divine plan in world processes by myriad forms and laws which give individual divine manifestation to individual objects and their activities. This pantheistic concept can be eminently seen in Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus:

For that we are Thine offspring; nay, all that in  
myriad motion  
Lives for its day on the earth bears one impress--  
thy likeness--upon it...  
Aye, for thy conquering hands have a servant of  
living fire--

Sharp is the bolt!--where it falls, Nature shrinks  
 at the shock and doth shudder.  
 Thus thou directest the Word universal that pulses  
 through all things...<sup>10</sup>

Thus in Greek thought there was no personal transcendent God like the God of the Old Testament, much less that of the personalized Logos of the Gospel of John. And the volatile usage of the word logos by the Hellenes does not significantly indicate a dynamistic conception so characteristic of Semitic literature.

The Old Testament is an ancient book of Near Eastern geographical origin, and in this sense contains various common conceptions found generally in "the Fertile Crescent." But the Hebrews made use of Near Eastern representations not just to represent their own views, but as a vehicle to convey truth by way of illustration, or for the purposes of aesthetic appreciation. One of these conceptions which the Old Testament has utilized for these purposes is the idea surrounding the powerful aspect of divine word. But there is an important distinction between the two groups, and this is one of form: in the Old Testament the word of Yahweh is never a mere force of nature as was the case in surrounding cultures, for the extra-Biblical gods were personified forces of nature, while Yahweh was personal, transcendent, and moral from the very beginning of Hebrew history; hence the d<sup>e</sup>bhar Yahweh is the function of a conscious, moral personality. In profane Semitic literature the "word" of the god was a material, physical principle, while in the Old Testament the Word exists in the actuating expression of the transcendent God. This can be seen in at least four aspects in the Old Testament: (1) the Creative (Psa. 33:6; 104:7; 148:1-5); (2) the Mediatorial-Preservative (Psa. 107:20; 147:15-18; 148:6,8); (3) the Judicial (Hos. 6:5; Isa. 11:4); and, (4) the Prophetic (Isa. 9:8; Jer. 33:14). The two strongest passages which support an independent personification of the Word as divine creative activity are Psalm 33:6; "By the word of Jehovah were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth" (A.S.V.), and Isaiah 55:10,11: "For as the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, and giveth seed to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." (A.S.V.)

From the uninspired literature largely dating from the Inter-Testamental period we are able to discern a departure from the Old Testament terminology surrounding the Word. In the canonical writings it was "the Word of God," while in these it is simply "the Word," perhaps the result of yielding to extra-Jewish pressures in a world that was rapidly becoming cosmopolitanized. The "Word" is remarkably hypostatized in the Wisdom of Solomon 18:15, 16:

Thine all-powerful word leaped from heaven out of  
 the royal throne,  
 A stern warrior, into the midst of the doomed land,  
 Bearing as a sharp sword thine unfeigned commandment;  
 And standing it filled all things with death;  
 And while it touched heaven it trode upon the earth.

This usage is rather in line with the Aramaic Targumim, which represented the acts of God by the personification of His attributes. The reason for this substitution in the Targumim was the matter of avoiding the offense of anthropomorphisms, the possible misinterpretation of the text, and the desire of some overly-zealous Jews to protect the holiness of God by using terms which designated certain attributes or aspects of His personality. To quote Albright, "In Deut. 4:24 it is not God Himself, but His Mêmôrâ which is a consuming fire."<sup>11</sup> The Mêmôrâ (word) was objectivized as activities in the terms of a mediator, but at the same time failing to identify the mediator with the Messiah.

There are two passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls that are claimed by some to have a bearing on the doctrine of creation as found in the Johannine Prologue.<sup>12</sup> In spite of the superficial similarity to the Johannine passage, the Qumran references are not identical at all because of one major difference: the Dead Sea Scriptures attribute creation to God, while John ascribes it to "the Word," Who, in New Testament theology is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, distinct from God the Father in personality, though not in essence. However, several Qumran passages are in line with the characteristic Semitic conception of the dynamic word, at times approaching the Old Testament form.

The Logos-doctrine was the bedrock of Philo's system, the focal-point of all his views. He took Hellenic concepts and attempted to synthesize them with the Word of the transcendent God found in the Old Testament. The result was the Logos as an intermediary being between God and the created world. His notable weakness is in oscillating between a personal and impersonal being; that is, it is inconsistent to represent, as he does, the Logos as a person distinct from God and at the same time as only a property of God actively operating in the world. Without further elaboration we can state confidently that in Philo the Logos differed from the Logos in John with respect to person, deity, existence, activity, historical manifestation, and terminology, discrepancies which militate against the possibility that John directly borrowed the concept from Philo.

#### A POSITIVE APPROACH TO THE ORIGIN OF THE JOHANNINE CONCEPT

We can properly approach the problem of the Johannine usage on the basis of its alignment with the Semitic, and, more narrowly and directly, Hebrew expressions. This is not to minimize the extent to which John introduced new elements and fresh interpretation to the Logos concept by means of the revelation of inspiration and the historical manifestation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. But in view of the extensive quotation of Old Testament Scripture by the Christian authors stimulated by the guidance of the Holy Spirit along with their strongly-imbedded personal familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures, it is most natural to look to such a source for the key to John's employment of the term "Word." And Christ Himself revealed such a foundation when He said to the Jews, "Ye search the Scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me" (John 5:39, 40 A.S.V.).

From the Old Testament come four lines of teaching which have a bearing on John's doctrine, and with which the Johannine concept marvellously agrees. These are: (1) the Word of the personal God as causative divine formative energy, responsible for the present arrangement of the cosmos (Gen. 1); (2) the appearance of the mal'ach Yahweh, the "Angel of the Lord," God's

messenger of revelation to the patriarchs and prophets; (3) the activity of the d<sup>a</sup>bhar Yahweh, "the Word of Jehovah," primarily in the Psalms and Prophets; and (4) the prominent Wisdom passages of Proverbs 8 and Job 28.

This Christological concept is unintelligible and inexplicable as a Christian doctrine outside its rich heritage in God's most ancient inspired revelation: John interpreted what he knew of the Word personally in unequivocal conformity with the Old Testament. And this thought is suggestive of our whole approach to the issue: that the supreme influence in John's mind was the Person of Christ Himself and the realization that in this pure and holy life of Christ on earth all of God's purposes in revelation were accomplished. This is the conclusion we reach after a study of John's Gospel and his other writings: he was simply overwhelmed by the truth of Christ's message, and this was explainable on no other grounds than that He in Himself was the true message He proclaimed, the very revelation of God, indeed, The Word. John's conviction on this matter was further heightened by an acute sensitivity to the Old Testament teaching that the Word was mediator of creation and revelation, a consideration further supported by other New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament as the only authoritative pre-Christian source of doctrine. This assertion is further borne out by the impact of Christ Himself on other authors of the New Testament, along with their comparable teaching of the eternal pre-existence of Christ and His ministry in creation and redemption, which at last becomes the content of the Christian message: the word of reconciliation.

We would stress, then, that the Biblical and Personal elements were the foremost and immediate elements in the development of Johannine Christology, making the employment of logos emphatically and distinctively a Christian concept, and more than that, a revelation by the Spirit of God. And what of these extra-Biblical instances of hypostatical speculation? It need not be absolutely denied that John was acquainted with them, and did, indeed, enjoy in their presentation a preparation for the final, divinely-inspired view of the Logos, a preparation both in the partial truths these speculations contained, and by way of antithesis to their erroneous conceptions. But these were only secondary and subordinate to the Biblical and Personal aspects, which charged John's message with that vital, life-giving energy drawn from the Word Himself, the "power of God unto salvation," "even to them that believe on His name."

#### A BRIEF EXEGESIS OF THE VERSE

The Apostle John forcefully introduces his theological life of Christ by the first attribute predicated of the Logos, His Pre-existence, His Eternity: "In the beginning was the Word." The similarity of en archē to b<sup>e</sup>rēšit in Genesis 1:1 is prominent, the Genesis account marking the temporal initiation of creation. By this identification the writer is saying, "When the act of creation took place the Word was." The exact source of regarding the Word's Eternity of Person is found in the imperfect ēn, "was." This construction features the durative aspect of the imperfect tense, for "the augment throws linear action into the past."<sup>13</sup> This construction thus affirms that the Logos already was existing prior to the punctiliar act of creation, throwing back the concept of the Word's Being from the impact of creation into timeless eternity. From a philosophical standpoint John's construction may be inadequate, for to use ēn in order to express duration and continuance in an area where there is no possibility for such a designation (in eternity) would be a categorical contradiction. But the existential verb eimi, which designates a thing as existing as

distinguished from non-existent, coupled with the durative imperfect, comes as close to representing pure, eternal Being as it is possible for the tongue of man to come in such a succinct statement.

The second attribute of the Word, that of Equality with God, is distinguished by the Personality of the Logos as identified by the preposition pros: "and the Word was with God." It was no accident that this preposition was used, for the preposition pros is distinctive above all others in the aspect of close proximity, "denoting direction towards a thing or position and state looking towards the object. One might correctly say that this preposition gives the distinct impression of a tendency toward, a movement in the direction of, God. It has even been translated as "face to face with God."<sup>15</sup> This would require conceiving of a relationship between two persons, the one an absolute being, completely independent, sufficient within Himself, towards which the other continually tends (en). This fact-to-face relationship is sustained by two other passages, Mark 14:49, and II Cor. 5:8. In accord with these usages John specifies the fellowship, and hence the equality, that exists between the Logos and God as between persons, and does not consider them as abstract, metaphysical concepts. At first glance there might be interpreted a duality of Deity from this phrase, or a subordination or creation-emanation from God, superficially regarded. John leaves it to the next phrase to reconcile this problem, and the answer given there shows decisively that it is only the Personality of the Word that is being considered in this second proposition.

John 1:1 has long been a battle-ground between orthodox Christians, who would uphold the doctrine of the Trinity, and the non-trinitarians, who by their interpretations exhibit tendencies toward polytheism, Unitarianism, or Arianism. The focal point of this controversy is the third proposition dealing with the Deity, or Essence of the Word stated by John in this verse: "And the Word was God." Defective views such as those of Arianism were long ago rejected by the common action of Christians who held to the orthodox position of the Christian faith. But in spite of this well-known fact a form of the Arian heresy persists to this day. The most active exponents of this teaching are the "International Bible Students," more popularly known as "Jehovah's Witnesses." Their view of the Person of Christ is represented in this quotation from their most recent literature:

He (the Logos) is the "only begotten Son" because he is the only one whom God himself created directly without the agency or co-operation of any creature (John 3:16 A.V.; A.S.; Dy). If the Word or Logos was not the first living creature whom God created, who, then, is God's first created Son, and how has this first creation been honored, and used as the first-made one of the family of God's sons? We know of no one but the Word or Logos.<sup>16</sup>

The absence of the article ho with theos in the predicate nominative construction of this verse is claimed to support the foregoing interpretation; that the Logos was like God as a god, possessing some of the qualities of God, but not God Himself or a part of God.<sup>17</sup> To this we would apply the following refutation:

1. If John had wished to convey this impression he could have used theios--"divine, deity, like God"--already used in II Pet. 1:3 and Acts 17:29.
2. To posit such an intermediary being would be to contradict the strict monotheism of Scripture.



3. A study of predicate nouns with and without the article occurring both before and after the verb (by E.C. Colwell of the University of Chicago) shows that out of 112 definite predicates before the verb, only 15 are used with the article (13%), while 97 are used without the article (87%). From this and other discussion he concludes that word-order and not definiteness is the variable quantum in passages of this nature. The exceptions to the general rule that definite predicate nouns regularly take the article are: (1) definite predicate nouns which follow the verb usually take the article; (2) definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article; (3) proper names regularly lack the article in the predicate.

4. The principles here outlined are at once destructive of the arguments advanced by those who would regard the construction as indefinite. The study by Colwell shows that a predicate nominative preceding the verb cannot be translated as indefinite solely because of the absence of the article, if the context suggests that the predicate is definite, clearly the case here.

5. The statement "and the Word was God" is not strange in the prologue of the Gospel that is climaxed by Thomas' confession, "My Lord and my God."

The proposition as we have interpreted it recognized the Logos as God in the fullest sense of all that man can conceive of God to be. It resolves the seeming duality suggested by the second proposition in affirming that the Word simply is God. This leaves us with a paradox which is irreconcilable by human logic and which stands logically unresolved in the New Testament. The Logos is God, and yet He is with God. That is to say that God and the Logos are not two beings, and yet they are also not identical. The obvious conclusion is that the Logos is God with respect to essence, while He is distinct with reference to personality, harmonizing with the testimony of other Scripture on the distinctions and unifying factors within the Trinity. We must take these Biblical statements as they stand, realizing that on the one hand the Persons of the Godhead are equal in being, power, and glory (Matt. 28:19, II Cor. 13:14), while on the other, there exist certain distinctions of activity and voluntary subordination between them, but these concern their respective functions. The primary function of the Logos, as we have seen, was to reveal the action of God in this earthly framework by the processes of creation, preservation, and revelation, and redemption. And He did all this because of Who He Was!

#### PARAPHRASE

"At the initiation of time when the creation of the world took place, the Logos--(the pre-existent, pre-incarnate Son of God, Who personally intervened in the cosmos for the purposes of creation, preservation, and revelation)--this Logos was already with God the Father, and this same Word was the essence of God in the most absolute sense."

#### DOCUMENTATION

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