

THE *LOGOS*: INVESTIGATING BACKGROUNDS, MEANINGS AND CONTEXT

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## Introduction

An introduction that opens up an investigative report on one of the greatest introductions, John 1, is truly a special task to undertake. The book of Matthews opens with the genealogy of Jesus into his birth. The book of Mark puts the reader instantly into the action of Jesus's baptism with John, his cousin. Luke starts with the news of John the Baptist, and the incarnation of Jesus to their respective mothers. However, the book of John begins with a style that is not common to the rest of the other three gospels. Adele Reinhartz analysis of the prologue states that John doesn't begin with a narrative of Jesus' conception or His birth. Rather, Jesus's arrival on the earth is portrayed in cosmological terms and his description of his role as God's son is emphasized.<sup>1</sup> In terms of form and structure, the introduction to the book of John takes on a poetic form and could possibly be a song that was sung by the early church. The poetic form and the words used in the beginning of this gospel do not appear in the rest of the work.<sup>2</sup>

Even more intriguing in the prologue, is its use of the term, the "word" or in Greek, *logos*. The *logos* is worth investigating as the context, background, and nuance of the term can steer the interpreter in several helpful directions in finding the meaning of the text. Understanding these nuances in the ancient cultures of the Jewish and Hellenistic people can help bring light to unlocking its meaning as a few interpretation issues come to the surface during the study of the term

### *What is Agreed Upon Concerning the Prologue*

To begin with, here is what is known and obvious in the book of John. Vimal Tirimanna states that even though the original form of the Prologue in John is still in debate, scholars point

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<sup>1</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 174.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhartz, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 174.

out that it can be grouped in three strophes. In the first strophe (John 1:1-5), the *logos* was with God at the beginning and was God and was the means through which the universe and life came into fruition. In the second strophe (John 1:10-12b), the *logos* came to its own, but was not received by its own. However, those who received the *logos* were given the right to become the children of God. In the third and final strophe (John 1:14,16), the *logos* became flesh as Jesus and the glory of the *logos* was experienced by those who believed. John 1:10-12b originally referred to the presence of the *logos* before the incarnation, and only in John 1:14,16 was the incarnate *logos* mentioned.<sup>3</sup> The term, *logos* is only mentioned in the first chapter and is not reprised again in the rest of the book.

In this report, I will address a few questions that naturally arise from reading this text. Before we ask those question, though, one must come to an agreement of some basis that will help us further discuss the queries. According to Reinhartz, most likely the authority over the book of John is the Beloved Disciple himself, with the date range of the composition of book being 70-130 CE. What this means is that John himself is a Hebrew person who is influenced by his own culture and religion, Judaism. However, it also puts him in the context of an Israelite who was heavily influenced by the Greeks and, later, the Romans.<sup>4</sup> With that being said, does the use of the word *logos* have a Greco-Roman background? Does the meaning rely heavily on understanding of the philosophies of their time? Is this the best way to understand the term and understand the heart of the writer? The other question that arises is whether or not the meaning of the *logos* is steeped in Old Testament background with just a Greco-Roman nuance for the first audience. How strong is the echo from OT background knowledge? How strong is the signal

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<sup>3</sup> Vimal Tirimanna. “*Logos: A Bridge-Builder for Interreligious Dialogue?*” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 19, no. 2 (2009): 195–214. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001762579&site=ehost-live> , 198.

<sup>4</sup> Reinhartz, 170.

of *logos* and the acuteness of the readers to catch it? The third realm of questioning comes from analyzing the way the first audience would have experienced reading the first chapter. Whether the original readers were Greek or Jewish, how did John 1 represent their experience of this Word and what can this say about how we understand the prologue, not just the term. Lastly, after investigating these questions and answers, how can we go about applying it to our own ministry life.

### **Ancient Greco Roman Influence on the Background**

Does the use of the word *logos* have a Greco Roman background? Does the meaning rely heavily on understanding of the philosophies of their time? NT Wright and Michael Bird, state that the new testament belongs in the ancient Greco- Roman world as much as it belongs to the ancient Jewish world.<sup>5</sup> Wright and Bird continue to state that the use of the *logos* in John 1 is an alarm signal for readers to consider the nuance of Greco Roman influence over the prologue. *Logos* is a concept made known by 6th Century BC Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, as an idea initially to illustrate the rational principle by which the universe came into being and by which all things exist. The *logos*, as the personified ‘idea’, becomes the one through whom the invisible Deity interacts with the corporeal.<sup>6</sup> The idea of the *logos* was then adopted by Jews like Philo of Alexandria and Justin Martyr of the second century.

#### *Heraclitus and the Logos*

To begin with, Tirimanna states that the origin of the term "*logos*" in ancient Greek, usually translated as "word," has a broad range of meanings and is present in all periods of Greek literature, except for Epic literature where it is infrequently used.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Tirimanna points

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<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 2019), 164.

<sup>6</sup> Wright and Bird, *New Testament in Its World*, 161.

<sup>7</sup> Tirimanna, "*Logos: A Bridge-Builder for Interreligious Dialogue?*", 196.

out that it is a verbal noun derived from the Greek verb "lego" which can signify "to count," "to recount," "to say," or "to speak." The various meanings of "*logos*" are connected to the two meanings of the verb. "*Logos*" can refer to both the process of computation and explanation, relating to human reasoning and rationality, and the rational principle of the cosmos. Tirimanna observes that these two nuances of the term are common in Greek philosophical literature.<sup>8</sup>

In the first few steps in understanding the *logos*, one can take a look at the works of Heraclitus. Tirimanna pays special attention to the fact that Heraclitus used the term "*logos*" in its common meanings such as proportion, account, and explanation. However, he also held that *logos* could be an underlying cosmic principle of order. The Stoics following Heraclitus also valued the concept of *logos* and believed that *logos*, God, and nature were one. *Logos* was believed to be the rational element that controlled the universe, and it was present in different ways throughout nature. Tirimanna adds that only people were thought to possess rationality as part of their nature, which reflected the rationality of the universe as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Philo and the Logos*

In the journey of schools of thought and wisdom, the next step in understanding Greco Roman philosophy on the *logos*, is a Hellenistic Jewish Philosopher named Philo. Philo is important to the investigation as he is one of the earliest philosophers to seemingly bring together Greek and Jewish philosophy. Donald Hagner state Philo's uncanny talent to combine Hellenistic and Jewish ideas into a unified philosophy, as well as his religious devotion, is so compelling that even leading experts on Philo's work cannot agree on which aspect is more

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<sup>8</sup> Tirimanna, 196.

<sup>9</sup> Tirimanna, 196.

essential to his legacy.<sup>10</sup> Philo's views on Hellenistic Jewish philosophies are vast, but what comes to the surface in the investigation is his thoughts on the Greco-Roman *logos*.

Before going deeper in the mind of Philo, one should mention his initial interactions with the term at hand. As a Hellenistic Jew, Philo interacted with the Masoretic texts by means of the Septuagint. The Greek word *logos* was used to translate a number of words from the original Hebrew. Tirimanna observes that over 90% of the time, "*logos*" translated the Hebrew word "*dabar*". Both the words "*dabar*" and *logos* had a broad range of context and nuances in both Greek and Hebrew. It could have meant narrative, speck, dialogue, oracle, or proverb. As "*dabar*" was translated into the *logos* in the Septuagint, it picked up a dynamic interpretation because of the context it was placed in. *Logos* in the Septuagint carried a sense of power and dynamism.<sup>11</sup> These points are important to understand Philo and his Greek influence but also important in understanding the richness of the Jewish background in the use of the word *logos* later on in this essay.

Philo believed in the concept of the *logos* but in a completely different way than the purely Greek philosophers. Donald Hagner states that contrary to Greek philosophers, Philo did not believe that the *logos* was God. Instead, Philo believed that the *logos* was merely an expression of God's wisdom. Hagner's simplifies Philo's beliefs on the *logos* by saying that Philo agrees with Plato's differentiation between the realm of sensory perception (*kosmos aisthetos*) and the realm of ideas or forms (*kosmos noetos*) that serves as the universe's blueprint. The *kosmos noetos* is known as the manifestation of God's mind, known as the Divine Reason (*ton theion logon*). At the same time, the *logos* interacts with the physical universe and acts as its

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<sup>10</sup> Donald Alfred Hagner. "The Vision of God in Philo and John: A Comparative Study." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 14, no. 2 (Spr 1971): 81–93. <https://search-ebscohost.com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000723855&site=ehost-live>. 81

<sup>11</sup> Tirimanna, 197.

rational principle, functioning as the controller (*diopos*) and navigator (*kubernetes*) of everything. Within humanity, the *logos* is the origin of our connection to God.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Philo asserts that the *logos*, which was operational in the creation of the earth, also serves as the way by which God's gifts are delivered to mankind. Hagner even states that the *logos* according to Philo was designated as God's representative, guiding his sheep by the means of justice and law, placing his *logos* and his Firstborn who to one day take control of government.<sup>13</sup> Hagner elaborates that the *logos* was able to make people grasp God's presence. The *logos* or *aggelloi* are considered indispensable "fellow travelers" for those who pursue God. It is clear that for Philo, the *logos* or its equivalent is absolutely critical for establishing a connection between God and humanity. The *logos* is the very image of the Existing One, and Philo goes so far as to say that the *logos*, as an interpreting entity, "must be God to us who are imperfect, but for the wise and perfect, the original Being is their God". Hagner, however, points out that despite all of Philo's personification of the *logos*, he is not truly contemplating a personal guide and companion.<sup>14</sup>

Reflecting on all Philo has to say about the *logos*, one can't help to draw connections with Jesus Christ. It almost seems like he is describing the lamb of God, the lion of Judah. First and foremost, Philo is coming from a Jewish background, which already puts him in the realm of messianic texts that point to Jesus. The connections are near and dear but Hagner warns us that Philo himself was probably not thinking of the *logos* as a friend like Jesus who was incarnated and walked and talked with humankind. The connections between Colossians 1 are truly worth noting: "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or

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<sup>12</sup>Hagner, "The Vision of God in Philo and John: A Comparative Study", 83.

<sup>13</sup> Hagner, 84.

<sup>14</sup> Hagner, 84.

powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:15-16, NIV). Paul states that Jesus is the image of the invisible one, while Philo states the *Logos* is the image of the invisible one. Paul states that in Jesus all things were created, while Philo states that everything was also created through the *Logos*. Connecting with John 1, once again the question arises whether or not John was addressing a way of expressing Christ by means of a Greek concept with a Jewish filter. Philo used a Greek framework to create a Jewish doctrine. Perhaps it is possible that John was using the same Greek framework to explain the supremacy of Christ as in Colossians 1.

Another important similarity between John and Philo is that both understand that there needs to be some sort of mediator between God and people. Obviously, both of them are using the word *logos* and are both pointing to the connecting nature of the *logos*. Hagner points out that the role of Christ as a mediator in John's Gospel is clear, as proven by the statement, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). Furthermore, Hagner points out that John asserts that "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18), and "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). Similarly, in Philo's writings, the *Logos* serves as a guide to the knowledge of God, much like Christ acts as the way to the Father in John's Gospel.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Slight Pushback to Philo and John's Logos*

Despite the inconspicuous similarities in wording and concept, Hagner points out a potential line in the sand between John and Philo as mentioned above. Hagner states that the major difference that is obviously apparent is that Philo views the *logos* as impersonal, despite his language of personification, and attaining knowledge of the *logos* falls short of the ultimate

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<sup>15</sup> Hagner, 85.

goal of knowing God.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, for John, the *logos* is embodied in the historical figure of Jesus and knowing him, making it exclusively personal. Furthermore, knowing Jesus equates to knowing the Father (John 14:7) and seeing Jesus is the same as seeing the Father (John 14:9). Therefore, knowing Jesus is the ultimate goal to be achieved, with no higher knowledge of God available through direct means. Hagner concludes that the essential knowledge of God that leads to eternal life is to love and have faith in Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Also, John's bold declaration that "word was God" (John 1:1) is in violation of Philo's idea of the *logos* since he didn't believe that the word was his almighty God to begin with. Dan Lioy and Robert Peltier report that Philo's *logos* does not share any place in the godhead.<sup>18</sup> Lioy and Peltier illustrate the role of Philo's *logos* in this way: "For Philo, the *logos* is looking onto the throne of God as one would attend an event honoring others. Philo's *logos* is watching and observing, not contributing to God's actions in the throne room. Philo's *logos* is a heavenly observer, not a participant."<sup>19</sup>

#### *Possible Intentionality of the Use of Logos by John*

After looking at how the use of *logos* could have interacted with Greco-Roman culture, the question still remains if John expected his first audience to receive the meanings of the term the way Philo historically used it. Above we see the differences and similarities between how John used it and Philo. However, do these differences really negate any influence from Philo? It is quite possible that John could have used this scheme to teach the first audience of the aspect of Christ using a frame of reference that they are familiar with, but amending, correcting and

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<sup>16</sup> Hagner, 85

<sup>17</sup> Hagner, 85

<sup>18</sup>Robert Peltier, and Dan Lioy. "Is John's Λόγος Christology a Polemical Response to Philo of Alexandria's *Logos* Philosophy? Part 2." *Conspectus* 28 (September 2019): 91–119. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLAI14191228000399&site=ehost-live>, 98.

<sup>19</sup>Peltier and Lioy, "Is John's Λόγος Christology a Polemical Response to Philo of Alexandria's *Logos* Philosophy? Part 2.", 98.

bringing to light a mystery hidden from both Hellenistic Jews and dare I say Gentile Greeks. Because of this, is it too farfetched to ask if John could have used this as a teaching tool to give Hellenized folks (Jew and Gentile) a way to understand the supremacy and character of Christ? Is this not what we see as Paul speaks on Mars Hill in Acts 17: 22-34. Reinhartz points out that there are a few nods and mentions to the fact that the book of John may have had more than just a Hebrew first audience.<sup>20</sup> John 4 speaks of Jesus's interactions with a Samaritan woman, and as result several Samaritans came to believe in Jesus. John 12 describes the strong interest in Jesus of some Hellenistic people after Jesus declares that his death will draw all people to himself. Also, John makes an accommodation in John 2:6, explaining the Jewish ritual of handwashing. Reinhartz mentions again that at least some of the Gospels intended audience was not of Jewish origin.<sup>21</sup>

Peltier and Liroy state that using the *logos* in a new way was a clever way to convey the divine origin and purpose of Jesus Christ to the people of the first-century Roman world, was indeed a strategic move of John.<sup>22</sup> Early Christian apologist Justin Martyr used it to defend the concept of the *logos*. John's use of the *logos* symbol was particularly effective because it drew on its Platonic origins, making it relevant to his readers. By leveraging the word's broad range of meanings in both Hellenist and Hebrew cultures, John was able to use it to his advantage.<sup>23</sup>

One historical reason is the possible rise of Gnosticism during the possible inception of the book of John. Gnosticism seemed to be the prevailing twisting of the Gospel during that time. Ancient Gnostic ideology is indeed broad, but Courson points to certain heresies that come forth

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<sup>20</sup> Reinhartz, 171.

<sup>21</sup> Reinhartz, 171.

<sup>22</sup> Peltier and Liroy, , "Is John's Λόγος Christology a Polemical Response to Philo of Alexandria's *Logos* Philosophy? Part 2.", 94.

<sup>23</sup> Peltier and Liroy, 94.

from their teachings.<sup>24</sup> Simply put, Gnostics believe that the body and the flesh is evil to its core, and only the spirit is good. They believed that if Jesus was God, then he couldn't have had a physical body. Jon Courson reports that Gnostics even believed that when Jesus walked, he left no footprints, when he ate, he didn't really swallow his food. Jesus may have appeared as a person, but he actually had no physical body. While John does bring emphasis in the beginning of John that Jesus is the Word and that it doesn't point to anything completely material, he is not finished with the story and the explanation. John specifically states that this "immaterial" word becomes flesh and that John himself laid on the warm chest of his savior in John 13:23. The risk of the Philo's *logos* and the Stoics' use of the word *logos* can lead to the Gnostic ideology. John's prologue may be a rebuttal to the false teaching by clearly stating the flesh is real.

Moving just a few years after the death of the apostles, was a renowned Christian apologist by the name of Justin Martyr. According to Henrik Thyssen, Justin used the concept of a Hellenized *logos* in order to explain the very importance and functions of Jesus in our interactions with God.<sup>25</sup> Thyssen elaborates on and says *Logos-Christology* had a useful apologetic function, as can be seen in Justin's First Apology where he employs it for this purpose. Justin uses *Logos-Christology* to argue that Christianity contains the true religious doctrine that has always been present and known by everyone because it is inherent in every human being. According to Justin, Jesus, the teacher of the Christians, is Reason itself, in which

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<sup>24</sup> Jon Courson, *Jon Courson's Application Commentary: New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 443.

<sup>25</sup>Henrik Pontoppidan Thyssen. "Philosophical Christology in the New Testament." *Numen* 53, no. 2 (2006): 133–76. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001536103&site=ehost-live> , 157.

all humans participate. This argument is a common apologetic theme that addresses the objection to Christianity of why the revealer came so late.<sup>26</sup>

Since Christianity was young during Justin's time, many opposed to the new faith claimed it was impossible for people to have interacted with this God since he only appeared in flesh a century and a half ago. If people didn't have this interaction with God, then all those who lived before him were immoral and unable to be saved. Justin refutes this and uses the foundation of the Hellenized concept of the *logos* against the naysayers. He claims that since divine reason has already existed, created all mankind with his reason, mankind is able to make moral decisions. Jesus is that divine reason that has created all things and through him all things were created. Therefore, people who existed pre-incarnation, all have had some sort of interaction with the divine reason and his morality.<sup>27</sup>

Justin's use of the concept of the *logos* to defend Christianity is indeed masterful. However, there is an even more obvious reason for investigating why John would use the *logos* in a Hellenistic way. A simple grounds for John's use of the hellenized *logos*, is elementarily, the length of time between Justin's writing and walk with Jesus, and the death of the apostles. As modern readers of the bible, we are going through leaps and bounds navigating cultural and historical context that happened centuries ago (as you can see above). However, since Justin came subsequently after these mighty men of God, perhaps there wasn't such a gap in intellectual and philosophical frameworks of thought.

*What Is at Stake if The Hellenistic Use of the Logos is Not The Case*

If John simply used this as a cultural framework for Hellenistic people (both Jew and Greek) to understand Christ, then really there is no problem in terms of doctrine. John can still

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<sup>26</sup>Thyssen, "Philosophical Christology in the New Testament.", 157.

<sup>27</sup> Thyssen, 158.

make the points that Christ is eternal, light, God, hope, and has become flesh and is extremely personal and intimate, even without a Hellenistic framework. To be fair, the way Justin masterfully used it in an apologetic way shows us that the *Logos* was a strategic way to break through barriers in mental and philosophical frameworks. This was a major obstacle and distraction for people in Justin's time and it worked. However, the modern reader who did not understand the Hellenistic gravitas of the word, (just like myself before researching for this paper), can still grasp the points and the nuance that John was trying to get across to some extent. However, after understanding the works of Philo and Justin, there is a next level of philosophical depth that one appreciates while reading John 1 and even Colossians 1.

### **Jewish Influence on the *Logos***

To begin with, it goes without saying that the author of the book of John is a Hebrew person living in an ancient Greco-Roman context.<sup>28</sup> The Gospel of John portrays extensive knowledge of Second-Temple Jerusalem, Jewish practice, and Jewish methods of biblical understanding.<sup>29</sup> Even the first century Jewish historian Josephus uses the word "signs" the same way John does to refer to the manifestations of the divine presence.<sup>30</sup> The Gospel contains numerous references and indirect mentions to the Pentateuch, prophetic literature, and other writings, along with the inclusion of Biblical figures such as Abraham, Moses, and Jacob. An underlying Jewish motif throughout John 1 is Lady Wisdom and her association with God and creation, which would have been immediately recognizable to a Jew living at that time. In particular, John 8:31-59 is grounded in the Abrahamic cycle (Gen 12-36), highlighting the contrast between Ishmael and Isaac, Abraham's hospitality to three angelic visitors, and the

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<sup>28</sup> Reinhartz, 170.

<sup>29</sup> Reinhartz, 171.

<sup>30</sup> Reinhartz, 171.

tradition that Abraham received a vision of the future and heavenly words. The Exodus from Egypt is also evoked in John 6.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, Ben Witherington pays special attention to the notion that the prologue may be from an early church hymn. Going back to the point that John 1 has strong Jewish roots, the order and form of the prologue contains parts of the structure of a Jewish wisdom hymn.<sup>32</sup> The V shape of hymns of wisdom contain hymns of preexistence, earthly existence, and existence in heaven after death. Witherington also adds that verse 14 shows imagery of “tabernacling”, a strong Jewish comparison of God putting his presence among humans in a tent of some sort.<sup>33</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels agrees with Witherington and states the verbs and nouns used in verse 14 were purposely used to trigger a response from Jewish people.<sup>34</sup> Developing from this idea, Witherington states the description of the *logos* strongly echoes, not only Jewish wisdom hymns but also Jewish wisdom literature. The *logos* echoes the narrative of the law coming to children of Israel, specifically Sirach 24, where the Torah is called wisdom.<sup>35</sup> John draws from this and instead of linking Wisdom or Word with the torah, Wisdom is identified as Christ. Christ is seen as the eclipsing law of Moses. Witherington notes that the prologue actually wants to make clear that Jesus both fulfills and makes obsolete the earlier institutions of Judaism.<sup>36</sup>

Tirimanna also makes close connections with the way wisdom is used and the way the *logos* is used in the prologue. Tirimanna states that the divine Wisdom feature is an ongoing theme in several wisdom literature texts, including Proverbs, Sirach, and the Wisdom of

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<sup>31</sup> Reinhartz, 171.

<sup>32</sup> Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 48.

<sup>33</sup> Witherington, 49.

<sup>34</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2010), 91.

<sup>35</sup> Witherington, *Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Witherington, 49.

Solomon, and it is closely related to the *logos* theme.<sup>37</sup> These writings put into focus God's wisdom in creating the world, similar to how the Genesis account emphasizes God's creative Word. Over time, these two concepts became more synonymous. In these wisdom texts, wisdom is often personified as a woman or a wife, with the use of feminine pronouns "she" and "her." Proverbs 8:22 portrays wisdom as God's first creation and as either the agent or attendant of the rest of creation. Tirimanna elaborates further and observes that wisdom is also described as sitting beside God's throne in Wisdom 9:4, and is characterized as a "pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" and an image of God's goodness in Wisdom 7:25-26.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, wisdom is said to have assisted in creation in Wisdom 8:6, 9:2, and 9:9.

Furthermore, Michaels develops this idea further and states that Jesus is purposely depicted as the new Moses.<sup>39</sup> The word is compared to the Sinai theophany and an imagery of the glory of the tabernacle is evoked. All the other tabernacles and temples have transitory or incomplete, but by Jesus all are fulfilled and superseded by him.<sup>40</sup> Michaels compares Exodus 33 and John 1 in order to compare and contrast the uses of the word and the glory that is both in the tabernacle and in Jesus.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Tirimanna, 197.

<sup>38</sup> Tirimanna, 197.

<sup>39</sup> Michaels, , *The Gospel of John*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Michaels, 94.

<sup>41</sup> Michaels, 92.

<b>Exodus 33</b>	<b>John 1</b>
7 Now Moses used to take the tabernacle	14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
9 the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance.	17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
10 Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance	18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and[b] is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.
11 The LORD would speak to Moses face to face	
20 “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”	
23 you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”	

The points of contact are extremely numerous between Exodus 33 and John 1. However, Michaels points out that there is also a paradox in the two excerpts between Exodus and John 1 and the key is looking into the word “beheld”. A Jewish person would understand how the children of Israel beheld the glory of the Lord during the exodus/tabernacle times. However, John 1 is purposely put in a paradoxical way to talk about a whole different way of beholding the glory of the Lord. Michaels states that the glory John was talking about was not about shining lights of outward splendor, but inward humility that took on earthly flesh, walked among man, and took on the sinner’s cross.<sup>42</sup>

D.A. Carson believes readers should pay closer attention to the Old Testament influences in the interpretation of the *Logos*. Once again, Carson uses the word “*dabar*” to help determine the use of the word *logos*. In the Old Testament, the term ‘the word’ (Heb. *dābār*) is closely

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<sup>42</sup> Michaels, 93

associated to God's powerful actions in creation (Gen 1:3, Ps33:6), revelation (Jer 1:4, Isa 9:8, Ezek 33:7, Amos 3:1, 8), and salvation (Ps107:20, Isa 55:11).<sup>43</sup> For instance, Carson observes that when God speaks to the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 7:3, elsewhere it is stated that 'the word of the LORD came to Isaiah' (Isa 38:4, Jer 1:4 and Ezek1:6). In Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, and so on, God speaks and his powerful word ignites creation. This same word also brings about deliverance and judgment (Isa 55:11, and also in Ps 29:3). Furthermore, Carson reports that when some of God's people were struck with sickness that threatened their lives, God sent his word and healed them (Ps 107:20). After the Old Testament period, Jewish writings (Wis18:14,15) further develop this personification of 'the word'. Carson concludes that whether John, in the New Testament, was influenced by the Greek version of the Old Testament or an Aramaic paraphrase (known as a *Targum*), there is little doubt that the language used in reference to 'the word' has deep roots in Jewish tradition.<sup>44</sup>

Another possible reason why the interpretation of the *logos* could have had strong Jewish roots, was the way the Jews needed some sort of theology to explain the transcendence of God similar in the way Philo described it above. Beside Philo, other Semitic speaking Jews held on to some belief of a “second-god” who had a ranking above the angels, whose name was the “*Memra*”.<sup>45</sup> Daniel Boyarin reports that these beliefs were held by many Jews even though this might not be on official Rabbinic texts, it was most definitely found on Aramaic para-Rabbonnic

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<sup>43</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary / The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 115.

<sup>44</sup> Carson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary / The Gospel According to John*, 115.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel Boyarin. “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John.” *Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (July 2001): 243–84. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001254506&site=ehost-live>. 253

literature.<sup>46</sup> *Memra* personifies the Law and serves as the agent of the Deity who upholds the course of nature.<sup>47</sup> Boyarin also states that despite the official rabbinic theology's condemnation of the *Memra* or *Logos* as the heresy of "Two Powers in Heaven," there were numerous Jews in both Palestine and the Diaspora who adhered to this monotheistic theology before and during the time of the Rabbis.<sup>48</sup>

Boyarin states that some opposed to the concept of the *Memra* say that it is only a function of the deity not an actual being itself.<sup>49</sup> Boyarin questions the pushback with the notion that if the *Memra* is simply a name used to avoid stating that God himself has created, appeared, supported, and saved, with the purpose of preserving his absolute transcendence, then who actually executed all these things? Boyarin digs deeper and asks if it was God himself, then the purpose of using the *Memra* to protect his transcendence is defeated. If it was some other divine being, then the *Memra* is simply not just a name. The development of *Sophia/Logos* within Judaism was aimed at curating a theology of the transcendence of God, and the current widely accepted view suggests that the *Memra* is only used as a linguistic simulation of such a theology, without actually providing the theology.<sup>50</sup> Boyarin concludes, however, that assuming that the usage is meaningless is not a good hermeneutic approach. It is more reasonable to assume that it means something. Therefore, Boyarin states the strongest interpretation of the *Memra* is that it is not just a name but an actual divine entity or mediator.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Boyarin, . "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John.", 254.

<sup>47</sup> Boyarin, 254.

<sup>48</sup> Boyarin, 254.

<sup>49</sup> Boyarin, 255.

<sup>50</sup> Boyarin, 255.

<sup>51</sup> Boyarin, 255.

*Is the Use of The Logos Hellenistic or Jewish?*

After researching both views on how backgrounds and foregrounds in Hellenistic or Jewish context play a part in understanding the use of the *logos*, it is fair to say that there are significant overlaps. Dare I say, we might have a situation where the ancient question of “what came first, the chicken and the egg?” is at play. Philo was a Hellenized Jewish philosopher, but he adapted a Hellenized philosophy to his Jewish worldview. However, this was not created in a vacuum. As reported above, the concept of wisdom is fair game for Jewish thought alone without any Greek influence. Therefore, is it wrong to say that John was a masterful, spirit filled writer or teacher who knew full well that the use of the *logos* would strike a power chord with both of the people groups? Are we creating a false dichotomy between the two cultures? I believe it is fair to say that both cultures and philosophies believed in a dynamic force that held the blueprint and the scheme for all living things and the way they operate. After all, it wouldn't be too farfetched to say that all people groups have experienced God in some way. Paul states, “For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God” (Rom 1:20). One can see here that John was attempting to develop further from those ideas and explain to both groups, that this once existential, intangible *logos*, *targum*, *memra*, *dabar*, has walked, talked and bled with him and the believers that have received him. Carson puts it plainly that the term "Word" in the Old Testament represents God's powerful self-expression in creation, revelation, and salvation.<sup>52</sup> Carson elaborates further and states that by personifying this "Word," John is able to use it as a title for God's ultimate self-disclosure, his own Son. While the term may have originally held richer meaning for Jewish readers, it could also resonate with those from pagan backgrounds. Carson reconciles the two schools of thought

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<sup>52</sup> Carson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary / The Gospel According to John*, 116.

and emphases that however different or the same the original audiences were, all readers would be compelled to engage in fresh thought due to the author's use of the term.<sup>53</sup>

*Alternate Perspective on Understanding The Logos*

So far, the research presented in this depicts the background knowledge of the *logos* as it pertains to both the ancient Hellenistic philosophies, the Jewish backgrounds, and perhaps an artful illustration of the mixture of the two. However, there is another way to understand the *logos*. This perspective is different from the two above as it does not necessarily look backward into the context, instead it looks forward into the points that are trying to be made by John by the church and for the church. The question that this method proposes is simply questioning how we can understand the *logos* by having some sort of background in the two cultures, but also paying close attention to how the early church experienced the *logos* for themselves.<sup>54</sup> Carson suggests that this method doesn't mean that one is making the background irrelevant, rather early Christians looked for agreeable categories, words, associations, to express what they had just encountered with Jesus.<sup>55</sup> Christians had to find relevant words to explain, teach, and express what they knew, and logically it was the words that were commonly used during that age. Carson elaborates and says that the choices of terms that they used had semantic ranges so extensive that they could format the term by their own usage to make it illustrate, in the context of their own work, what they knew to be true of Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup>

With that being said, Carson states that the background information itself cannot reveal what John meant by the *logo*. Instead, we simply need to see how John is using it in the prologue. Carson breaks down John's heart behind using the term. Since the Word, which is a

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<sup>53</sup> Carson, 116.

<sup>54</sup> Carson, 116.

<sup>55</sup> Carson, 116.

<sup>56</sup> Carson, 116.

divine expression of self, existed from the beginning, it could be believed that it was either in the company of God or was nothing short of God's essence. However, John contends that the Word was both with God and was God.

Carson calls us to pay close attention to the word "pros. In utilizing the preposition "pros" to illustrate this relationship, which commonly means "to" or "toward," John is believed to be emphasizing a special intimacy between the Word and God. Carson emotes John's intentions above akin to two lovers running to each other on a beach in a romantic movie.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Carson digs deeper into the term. During the first century in Greek, the word "pros" was starting to be used in contexts that were traditionally reserved for other words meaning "with."<sup>58</sup> In the NIV translation of the Bible, instances of "with" are consistently translated using "pros" in sentences like "Aren't his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3), "Every day I was with you" (Mark 14:49), "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8), "I would have liked to keep him with me" (Philemon 13), and "the eternal life, which was with the Father" (1 Jn 1:2). What's profound about these examples is that "pros" typically shows the meaning of "with" only in lieu of a person being with another person, often in a close or intimate relationship. Carson then suggests that John, in a subtle way, may already be implying that the "Word" he refers to is a person, who is with God and therefore distinct from God, and who enjoys a personal relationship with him.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, another obvious but striking portion of the prologue is the nuance that the concept of the trinity may be in play in John 1. The fact that John posits that the word was with God and word was God, calls the reader to think about the nature of the persons of God. Carson states that John purposely posits these two together so that readers know that Jesus does not

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<sup>57</sup> Carson, 116.

<sup>58</sup> Carson, 116.

<sup>59</sup> Carson, 116.

make up all the Godhead but certainly belongs to it.<sup>60</sup> With that being said, John's intention for the prologue is to make sure that the deeds of Jesus, the words of Jesus, are all the actions of God himself.<sup>61</sup>

### **Application for Personal Ministry and Life**

Carson's synthesis of the Hellenized *logos* and the Jewish *logos* was the most profound in terms of application. By truly bringing into attention the relational, intimate, personal angle of John's *logos*, Carson brings it all back down to earth, so to speak. As one reflects on the two other views and concepts of the *logos*, it is clear that they seem cold, distant, and impersonal. Even if they were to call it divine in essence, there is still this idea that God is powerful but hard to find, and nowhere to be actually found or purposely close but yet so distant. With John's *logos* we see the authority and the preeminent God, but we can't deny Carson's observance of a purposefully relational God.

The *logos* is not just a concept, thought, or force. John says it took on flesh, real human flesh, that could be touched, that could be hungry, that could be born of a virgin's womb and that could physically die on a criminal's cross. We see the emphasis of this closeness as John the beloved laid on his chest (John 13:23). We see the reality of his physical body through his wounds, that even after his resurrection, Thomas is asked to touch his nail pierced hands and his sides. Furthermore, as the book of John comes to an end, the *logos* in the flesh continue to be present and relational. After Jesus dies on the cross, rises from the grave, he invites his disciples to come and eat with him on the beach (John 21). Truly, humbling that the divine word that has been thought to just be an idea, some sort of divine ethereal concept, is the one who eats with them and talks with them.

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<sup>60</sup> Carson, 117.

<sup>61</sup> Carson, 117.

A relational God is truly admirable and wonderful, but even better is how Jesus becomes flesh then walks among humanity. He is the light that shines through the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it (John 1:5). Jesus Enters into the messiness, chaos, and unkosher parts of this world and cleanses it however He pleases. His presence is purifying as he forgives sins, heals the sick, and calms the storms. Where regular men walk, there is usually corruption and destruction. However wherever Jesus was, there is life.

Personally, knowing that our God is relational and close in the context of my sinfulness is truly comforting. I recall a memory that I had on my trip to Israel in the year 2018. Our tour group had just visited the proposed sight of Jesus' crucifixion and the tomb. What a moving and surreal moment it was to be in the same place where our Lord sacrificed his life for us. However, a strange feeling overwhelmed me. I suddenly felt so far away from my house in Queens, New York City. Here in Jerusalem, I was far from my wife, far from the smelly trains, far from the home address that no one in Jerusalem probably knows about. However, it dawned on me that even though I had lived so far away from the Golgotha, I was never too far from the *logos* that had been pursuing me since the beginning. At Jerusalem, I stared at the Temple Mount and thanked God that His love was there for me many years ago in my mother's basement in Woodhaven, Queens where I wept prayers of repentance. Most of you reading this probably have no idea where Woodhaven is, but God did. He found me and he saved me there even when I was far away. This is probably how John felt in the prologue as he talks about the *logos*, who was once conceived to be distant and far, but is closer and present than we think. I pray that as I minister to folks, that they would not just hear the words on my tongue about a God they had once heard before, but I pray that they would experience him the way John illustrates in his book.

A secondary application that can be suggested is how we can model Jesus in the way we live life with our other brethren in Christ. If Christ himself was a relational God, who sits, talks, discusses, reasons, and teaches his people, it is probably best to also live life with our believers in the same way. Churches should be firm with their bible studies and teachings, but should also put the words into action and value closeness, friendship, and vulnerability with one another. A cold and distant brother in Christ doesn't seem to reflect that personal God that we serve. It convicts me personally as I humbly confess that I tend to drift into isolation and spend days without interacting with someone and stewarding gospel centered brotherhood.

### **Unanswered Questions and Ideas for Further Research**

The study into the interpretation is truly a profound journey to embark on. A few studies that I would have liked to learn more about are different movements of apologetics that Christians had to embark on in order to defend the faith. This sparked my interest after stumbling across the works of Justin Martyr and his interactions with the *logos* to defend the faith. As mentioned above, Justin was able to leverage the preexisting knowledge of ancient Greco-Roman philosophy to help remove the distractions of people's views on Jesus. Starting from this point, this paper could have taken another turn in terms of how the *logos* is relevant for apologetics. It would have been interesting to see *logos* as a tool of defense and not just context for interpretation. One trail that I would have liked to take would be the application into different schools of thoughts throughout the ages. It would be really interesting to see how it could stand the test of time philosophically and still strike a chord in people's hearts throughout time. Justin's works are still studied and observed today, which is a great testament of the integrity of the word of God and the weakness of its naysayers.

Another topic of interest that stemmed from the study of the *logos* would be the reading of the apocrypha. The research above made several references into the extra biblical writings. The *logos* was referenced in the books of Wisdom and in the Sirach. Although these works are not canon to the protestant faith, I would have been interested in digging deeper into understanding Jewish thoughts in terms of the *logos*.

### **Conclusion**

The question of whether or not the *Logos* had strong Hellenistic ties led us into the research of the Stoics and their use of it. Our examination of the Stoics led us into the works of Philo whose works contained a Jewish lens into looking at the Greek concept. The way Philo expressed how everything was made through the *logos* and that it is the divine agent of God, resonated with the first few verses of the prologue. The next question was investigating whether or not the *Logos* has strong Jewish roots. The contents of the book of John display concepts appropriate Jewish context, which led one to believe that the first audience itself had to be Jewish to understand. The Greek versions of the Old Testament and extra biblical books associated the *logos* with the wisdom and resonated with the way John used the term. The forms present in certain Old Testament literature somewhat mirror the way the prologue is shaped as well.

Regardless, both backgrounds lead into one simple resolution, that the point of the prologue and the use of the *logos* was to show relational, intimate *logos*. It was meant to purposely shift the reader or the listener into a different frame of reference in which they have known or heard. The powerful, divine *logos* is personal and intimate, but is still God. The early church may have used this concept to express their experiences with the personal God who has given them eternal life in the way that made sense to them at the time. This great proclamation

reminds the reader and the believer that we must make an adjustment to our understanding of *logos*. We believe that Jesus is God, but we must also believe that he came in the flesh. We believe that he lived the perfect life in the flesh, but we must believe he lived it perfectly. We believe that he died on the cross, and but we must believe that he rose again. We believe that he rose again, but we must believe he is sitting at the right hand of the Father, where He was in the beginning of John 1.

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