

II. Prologue (1:1-18)

As noted previously, John's gospel account is unique in the way it introduces Jesus the Messiah. Each of the gospel writers constructed his introduction in a distinct fashion, but all three differ significantly from John. First of all, the others are all very brief in comparison with John's introduction. But, more importantly, they differ in orientation:

- Matthew and Mark introduced Jesus in terms of scriptural promise concerning the Messiah; Matthew identified Jesus as the son of Abraham and David (1:1) and Mark showed Him to be the Servant of Isaiah's prophecy (1:1-3; cf. Isaiah 40:1-11).
- For His part, Luke began simply by identifying Jesus to his friend Theophilus as the subject and concern of his treatise (1:1-4). He then proceeded to recount the circumstances of Jesus' conception and birth.

But John took a very different approach in his introduction. First, he began in eternity past prior to the creation when only God existed. In this way, he linked Jesus in the first instance with the solitary being of God. This association is punctuated by the obvious correspondence between John's opening statement and that which opens the book of Genesis. But most important, the connection John drew between the God of Genesis 1:1 and the subject of his account focuses on an entity he identified as the *Word*. It wasn't *Jesus* who was in the beginning as God was in the beginning; it was the Word (*Logos*). Incarnation in time and space was what established the connection between God and the man Jesus, and therefore between the Word and Jesus.

John introduced Jesus in terms of his relation to the creator God who is the God of Israel and all men. And he situated that relationship in the concept of *Logos*: The *Logos* that existed with God in the beginning has proceeded from God to become incarnate in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Thus John not only pressed Christology beyond time and space, he moved it into the domain of the divine. And he did so by means of a concept that is unique to him. His *logos* doctrine is absent from the other gospel accounts, and yet John believed it important to make it the focal point of his introduction of Israel's Messiah and the world's Savior. These considerations and others, including its pre-Christian heritage, have made the *logos* concept a popular topic of study and debate in Christian theology. For the very same reasons it is the appropriate place to begin the examination of John's gospel.

1. The Logos

As noted, the *logos* concept predates John, the Christian faith and Jesus of Nazareth. It had its origins in ancient pagan philosophy apart from pre-Christian Judaism and Jewish philosophy and theology. (It is one of the matters behind Gnosticism's attraction to Christianity in general and John's gospel in particular. Conversely, John's *logos* doctrine – and Gnosticism's affinity for it – led many in the early Church to reject his gospel.) Some locate the origin of the *logos* concept in Greek philosophy dating back at least to the sixth century B.C. Others find a *logos* doctrine in ancient Egyptian and Indian (Vedic) mythology and teaching, specifically in terms of a connection between divine *word* and *cosmology*: *logos* as originating and ordering the material universe.

It is true that many ancient cultures embraced cosmological schemes which held that the created order came about through the will and power of divine utterance. In this sense, the Genesis account is not at all unique. But in its earliest known Greek form associated with the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (c. 535-475 B.C.), the concept of the Logos had a broader sense and significance.

- Heraclitus, too, related it to cosmology, but to the issues of cosmological *nature* and *function* as well as origin. That is, he used the term *logos* to identify what he believed to be the ordering, unifying and harmonizing principle (rational law) in the everlasting universe that is everywhere subject to continual change. Heraclitus famously stated, “*Ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers.*” (Two millennia later Enlightenment philosophers would engage in the same quest for a single unifying principle, this time in the name of human reason.)
- Interestingly, Heraclitus also believed that men are naturally blind to this ordering and unifying *Logos*. Though they witness – and are subject to – its pervasive activity in all things, they don’t discern it (cf. John 1:3-5, 9-10). He observed: “*Of this Logos, being forever as I describe it, do men prove to be uncomprehending, both before they hear and once they have heard it. For although all things happen according to this Word, they are like the inexperienced experiencing words and deeds such as I explain when I distinguish each thing according to its nature and show how it is. Other men are unaware of what they do when they are awake just as they are forgetful of what they do when they are asleep.*”

Centuries later, the Jewish philosopher Philo (died c. 50 A.D.) “Hebraized” the Greek logos idea (particularly its Platonic version) by reading it into the Scriptures, especially in relation to the concept of divine wisdom. Guthrie observed: “*His highly developed allegorization enabled him [Philo] to find current Greek ideas in an Old Testament setting, but he sacrificed any historical approach in doing so. He was influenced by Plato’s theory of ideas in formulating his logos doctrine. While he considered the logos belonged to the world of ideas, he nevertheless also linked logos with the expression of the idea. He was, in fact, influenced by both his Hebrew and Greek background.*”

All of this is sufficient to demonstrate the long and diverse history of the logos concept – initially as a pre-Christian pagan notion and then as a component of strains of Jewish and Gnostic philosophy contemporaneous with the early Christian era. Thus when John spoke of a divine and creative “logos,” he was not innovating a new concept. To the contrary, his articulation closely corresponded to the Greek and Jewish counterparts – so much so that it’s not surprising early Christians were uncomfortable with his gospel account.

Moreover, this correspondence raises a whole set of questions: Did John know of the logos doctrines of Philo and the Greeks? It certainly seems he’d have been familiar with the Greek conceptions at least since they were well established by the first century and Palestine at that time was broadly Hellenized. (So the *Jewish* gospel writers recorded their accounts of Jesus’ person and work in *Greek*, not Hebrew or Aramaic.) And if John had that knowledge, did he draw on it in formulating his own logos doctrine?

And what of the correspondence between the prevailing conceptions of the Logos and the creation account in Genesis? Philo certainly made the connection – not only with Genesis but with the wider Old Testament scriptures which ascribe all sorts of creative and providential phenomena to God’s word (cf. Genesis 1 with Psalm 33:6-9; also Genesis 15:1-5; Psalm 103:20, 147:15-18, 148:8; Isaiah 55:1-11; Jeremiah 1:4-16, 23:28-29; etc.). And so, it seems, did John, evident in the striking parallel between his opening statement and that which opens the Hebrew Scriptures. All of this may appear to only complicate the challenge of grasping John’s prologue and his use of the Logos concept. But in reality, these questions and considerations are helpful in deciphering what John understood by the Logos and how his conception contributed to his prologue and subsequent account of Jesus’ person and work. Some summary observations follow:

- 1) First of all, it’s important to recognize that, in both its Greek and Hebrew forms, the Logos was conceived as a *divine* principle. The way in which Philo linked the Logos with Israel’s God is evident in the titles he ascribed to it; among them were *image* of God and *son* of God. However, by these titles he wasn’t claiming personal existence or true deity for the Logos, but the idea that the Logos has its origin in God and reflects and expresses Him. (Interestingly, this closely corresponds to the rabbinical notion of *Torah* as residing in Yahweh’s bosom and coming forth as His “first-born” to bring life to the world; cf. Genesis 1 and Deuteronomy 32:45-47.) Starting from a different notion of divinity, the Greeks weren’t as careful to maintain a clear distinction between the Logos and deity.
- 2) Consistent with its divine connotation, the Logos was associated with the *origin and function of the cosmos*. The Logos was conceived as the divine utterance or directed will through which all things came into existence and by which they are ordered, upheld and governed. So Philo held that the Logos is the mediating principle by which the transcendent creator God administers His oversight and direction of His creation. Conceived this way, it’s easy to see how Philo related the Logos to the biblical concept of *wisdom* (cf. Proverbs 8:1-36; Job 28:1-28; cf. also Deuteronomy 34:1-9; Psalm 104, esp. v. 24; Proverbs 1:20-33, 3:13-20).
- 3) Thus the Logos was viewed as *bridging the chasm between the divine and the creaturely*. This was the case with both its Jewish and Greek forms. The Logos is the divine instrument of both creation and providence; it is the expression and exercise of the divine will, both in the creative act itself and in the administration of the created order. In this sense, the Logos *embodies* the divine life, power and purpose and *discloses* them to the creation (notably men) *through* the creation.
- 4) A final important dimension of the Logos concept is the notion of its *incomprehensibility*. As noted, this was a key feature of Heraclitus’ doctrine and he specifically associated it with the dullness of the human heart and mind. It’s not that the Logos is invisible or hides itself; it is everywhere present, operative and evident but it escapes human notice and concern. The same holds true for the Jewish concept of the Logos to the extent that it was correlated with the scriptural word of God (cf. Deuteronomy 30:11-20 with 31:14-21; also Psalm 106:1-25).

These are core features of the logos doctrine as it existed in both Jewish and Greek cultures at the time of John's writing. Again, given its prevalence, it seems implausible that John had no knowledge of this doctrine. But assuming he did, why did he choose to incorporate it into his gospel account? More importantly, why would he use it in relation to Jesus the Messiah – especially in light of its pagan roots? And why, after making it the centerpiece of his prologue, did John never again mention the Logos in his account?

The answer that best takes into account and resolves the above questions and concerns is that John found in the contemporary logos doctrine a vehicle for introducing Jesus the Messiah in the most effective and succinctly comprehensive way.

- a. Whether in its pagan (Greek) or Jewish form, the logos concept John inherited embodied many of the ideas and qualities that are fundamental to Jesus' person and work. Thus, simply by identifying the Christ with the Logos, John had gone a long way toward giving his readers – whether Jew or Greek – a broad and accurate sense of who the Messiah/Savior of his account actually is.
- b. At the same time, John's identification must not be construed as indicating that the Messiah – either pre-incarnate or incarnate – is identical with the Logos espoused by Philo or the Greeks. The Logos of John's prologue *corresponds* to the Logos of Jewish and Greek philosophy, but they are not the same entity.
- c. And this correspondence has at least two significant aspects that are critical to John's meaning: *analogy* and *fulfillment*. With respect to analogy, the Messiah as the Logos is *like* the Logos envisioned by Philo and the Greek philosophers. Indeed, were this not the case, John's use of this term would be inappropriate, ineffective and even counterproductive; rather than giving his readers insight and a sound framework for interacting with his account, John's prologue – with its focal point in the Logos – would only leave them in the dark and utterly baffled.

But being analogous, the two logos entities cannot be identical; similarity and sameness are mutually exclusive. Rather, John's Logos is the *fulfillment* of the philosophical Logos in that it is the actual substance of the ideas and attributes ascribed to its theoretical counterpart: *John's Logos is in reality what the philosophers' Logos was in principle*. Heraclitus and the later Stoics spoke of a divine principle of knowledge, will and power whereby all things were created and are subsequently ordered, upheld and directed; Philo considered this principle in the light of Israel's Scriptures and so associated it with Yahweh's wisdom – the wisdom which functions as His manifest *word* in creation and providence.

- d. Thus John, not unlike Paul with the Athenians (cf. Acts 17:22ff), was saying to his first-century readers, Jew and Gentile alike: “*You recognize and marvel at the principle of divine knowledge, wisdom, will and manifest power which stands behind all that you see and experience in the world – a mediating “Logos” that bridges the chasm between transcendent deity and yourselves and the rest of the creation... what, therefore, you reverence in mystery, let me make known to you.*”