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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

ST. JOHN'S ETERNAL WORD

“WORD” in the New Testament is used in three clearly distinct ways. It is the ordinary spoken utterance, whether “rumour”, the “sayings” of Jesus, or the “account” which has to be given. In the second place, and more technically, it is the “word” of preaching, the “word” of the Kingdom, which is “heard”, which is “confirmed” by signs; and there are “ministers of the word”. But we are concerned with its third and undoubtedly personal sense. The eternal, divine Word is used only in the writings we usually describe as Johannine: the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, 1 John, and the Apocalypse.

St. John is reputed to have written his Gospel in Ephesus, a centre of Greek philosophy, and it may not be a coincidence that in this city the word *Logos* was first put forward as a philosophical idea. Heraclitus, the precursor of Bergsonian relativity, applied the term to God as the immanent divine Reason in nature and in man, and as the fundamental principle which underlies the universe. Men hear this Word, both externally in nature and also in their own hearts. It was left to Plato to give it a more transcendental force. Plato's *Logos* was that Reason which exists only in the mind of God and gives to all created things their reality. In the plural the *Logoi* were the conceptual patterns of visible, perceptible things.

This very transcendental idea was relaxed somewhat by Stoic thinkers, and the *Logos* was more materialistically and immanently conceived as the organic Order, or Principle of the universe. Often they spoke of it as the ethereal Fire, eternal and divine. It was to them the World-Soul which shapes the world in conformity with a purpose. But they looked at the *Logos* in two ways. First, as a potentiality only, it was *endiathetos*; but when it realised itself in some form of action, shaping, moulding, or inspiring, then the epithet *prophorikos* was applied to it. Stoicism is pantheism. It reached its height in the noble *Hymn to Zeus* (Cleanthes). The reason why organic beings grow according to regular types or species is because the *Logos* is within them. Through it alone men grow into men and not trees, and through it alone all things keep their ancient places. Looked at in this

way, they described the *Logos* as *spermatikos*. We can see that it was in some sense a creative Word, but it is not at all parallel with the *Logos* of St. John, for the Stoics never conceived of a cosmic *Logos* standing apart from God. The plural is generally used; in the singular, it is usually *world-scheme* that is meant and nothing more. It has been aptly observed, regarding "the Stoic ring" of part of St. John's Prologue, that this is only what one would expect since "Ephesus had been the headquarters of the *Logos*-idea as developed by the philosophy of Heraclitus, himself a revered author in Asian Christian circles" (Moffatt, *ILNT*, ed. 3, p. 525). The divinity and eternity of the *Logos* was Stoic enough, but St. John's sentence, "the Word was with God", is foreign to their ideas and very Jewish. Recent research has tended to find the origin of St. John's *Logos* in the older Wisdom-thought of Judaism rather than in Greek thought. We notice, too, that St. John is wholly occupied with the activity of a transcendent and personal God, who saves men by bringing to them certain blessings which form key words of his Gospel: life, light, love, grace, truth. His message, in common with that of the early Church, was concerning a Word of God, spoken to the world in a living historic Person. It is the Word of the cross, the Word of His grace, spoken out by God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. St. John has no use for the thought of immanent Reason (Heraclitus), or of the organic Principle (Stoics). That which monopolizes the remainder of his Gospel is the Son; and in the light of this latter term must *Logos* be interpreted.

Perhaps the predominant opinion (Inge, E. F. Scott and others) is that St. John derived his *Logos* conception from the Alexandrian philosophy of Philo. Philo uses the word some thirteen hundred times, and it is not always easy to see what he means by it. He strove to form a synthesis between Hebrew and Stoic views of the *Logos*. So there can be no doubt that he was influenced by Jewish speculations, and doubtless by the Book of Wisdom in particular, in which *Sophia* is hypostatized as God's intermediary in the ordering of the world, for he identified the *Logos* with *Sophia* (" . . . the Wisdom of God, and that is the Word of God": *Leg. All.* i). He made a synthesis also between Judaism and Plato's theory of Ideas, in order to bridge the gulf between the absolute transcendence of a God who was quite separated from the finite world and the world itself. Judaism bridged it with a doctrine of mediating angels. Philo bridged it

with the Ideas of Plato. Now of these Ideas, or Powers, Philo conceived the *Logos* to be the total or chief one through which God communicated with the world. The difficulty is to decide whether Philo's way of speaking is merely poetical or whether real personalisation is intended. His language is neither clear nor consistent, but he takes full advantage of the fact that in Greek the word can mean both *reason* and *word*, and attaches thereto Greek and Jewish conceptions respectively. He gives to it all the functions which in the Old Testament belong to the sovereign creative Word of God. To Philo God is transcendent and unknowable, but He projects from His own being a second divine Principle by which He creates and governs the world. "The primal Existence is God, and next to Him is the Logos of God" (*Leg. All.* ii). The Logos is the highest angel, the first-born son of God, the second God. The "Helmsman of the universe" grasps him as a rudder, by which to guide all things on their course (*Migr. Abr.* 6).

St. John's thought must therefore have some connection with Philo or at least with that aroma of dialectical thought which surrounded the philosopher. In St. John and Philo are striking similarities of expression. The *Logos* sees God and reveals Him to others; now for Philo, to see God was the mark of primogeniture (*de post. Caini*, 18). The Johannine phrase, "grace for grace", is another adaptation of Philonic language (*ibid.*, 43). No doubt St. John intended to attract educated Greek readers by embodying much of their thought in his Gospel, at the same time showing how inadequate such thought was to express the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. *Logos* had for long been used by St. John's countrymen to express God's way of revealing Himself. He would think this word all the more appropriate since it signified that for which the Greeks also were seeking. He need not have taken it immediately from Philo, but the similarities do at least indicate that he was influenced by the usage which Philo had helped to form.

It has been maintained that the foundation of the Johannine *Logos* conception was the idea that God is unknown unless and until He be revealed (Schmiedel, *Encycl. Bibl.*, 2534). As the Old Testament never says such a thing it is held that the notion springs from Plato's dualism between God and Matter, to which the Stoics added the idea that the *Logos* performs in the world what God's absolute goodness forbids Him to do, because the

world is entirely evil. Philo connected this idea with some from the Old Testament, and developed it along lines which prepared the way for St. John's *Logos*. But for this view to be correct St. John would have to share the dualism which is fundamental to all this. In this case he would not have cared to write that God so *loved* the world! We might place alongside this the view of another writer in the same work, who while admitting that the Fourth Gospel has not slavishly copied Philo, alleges that the author skilfully selected and adapted what seemed useful to him in attempting to Christianise the *Logos* (A. Jülicher, *ibid.*, 2812).

But St. John's *Logos* differs from Philo's much more than it resembles it. While a history of the actual word is most illuminating, it cannot fully explain all that was in St. John's mind. He himself seems to imply the inadequacy of all Greek thought on the subject, by stating: (a) The *Logos* was very God, having a real personality—the pre-existent Son of God who became incarnate as Jesus. "In the beginning" involves His absolute eternity. The strong preposition "with" suggests that He existed in a living fellowship with the Father, His life going out to meet the Father's. The essential and eternal unity of the *Logos* with God is made plain. (b) He took human flesh; that tremendous phrase would have been offensive to Philo.

One has gone so far as to derive St. John's *Logos* from the Hermetic theosophy of Egypt (Reitzenstein). The tractate *Poimandres* does truly take the cosmogony of Genesis as a basis for speculation in which the *Logos* idea is predominant. But the researches of C. H. Dodd (*The Bible and the Greeks*) have shown that the parallels with the New Testament in the tractate are best explained "as the result of minds working under the same general influences".

The Jewish tone of the Gospel inclines us to think that St. John wrote *Logos* because he was thinking predominantly not in Greek terms but Jewish. Creative activity, as in Genesis i, is the major theme in this Prologue. The thought of *light* is also reminiscent of Genesis. Why then may we not say that St. John was merely doing with the Hebrew *dabhar* what the LXX had already done with it, i.e. translated it by the Greek word *logos* rather than *rhēma*? In Psalm xxxiii, as well as in Genesis, this spoken Word is creative; the heavens were made by it. For St. John's personalisation there is ample Jewish precedent in the Wisdom literature, which doubtless also influenced Philo's

Logos doctrine; only the *Word* now becomes *Wisdom*. She is the secret of life, and God's messenger who calls in love to the sons of men, who was formed by Jehovah from everlasting, and is daily His delight. It is true St. John mysteriously avoids the word *Wisdom*; but may not this be due to his desire to escape its Greek associations and return to the old Hebrew idea of Genesis? May not "In the beginning . . . God said" have been in his mind?

Yes, but not exclusively. We gather from Colossians and Hebrews that the *Logos* conception, though the word is never used, had already entered the realms of Christian thought before St. John wrote. In I Corinthians St. Paul prefers the name *Wisdom* and seems purposely to avoid *Logos*; in so doing he reverts to the usage of Hellenistic Jews (e.g. in the *Wisdom of Ben-Sira*), by-passing Philo. But later on St. Paul even shrinks from the term *Wisdom*. We do not find it in later epistles. In Colossians i the words *Wisdom* and *Logos* seem to cry aloud for expression, but they never appear. Whether these had become distinctively Gnostic terms we cannot say. Certainly St. John decided to risk the use of one of them in setting the note of his Gospel. In view of this there can hardly be any doubt that St. John wished to suggest something more than an exclusively Jewish conception. Why else should he place in such prominence a term from which all other New Testament writers shrank?

His use of that simple, innocent-seeming word must have staggered the imagination of any reader acquainted with Greek history and philosophy, causing it to reel with wonder at the thought of all that such a mighty-atom of a word implied. It was indeed a bold stroke of a pen. The author could hardly have been unaware of the fuse he was lighting, and of the tremendous explosion which must follow the use of such a word when applied to the Lord Jesus. It has in fact blasted and undermined the philosophies of mankind. It must have shaken some and thrilled others to read on through the Prologue and find that in Jesus the Carpenter all categories of human thought are comprehended; that He is therefore the Voice which Heracleitus the thinker had listened to, and the World-Spirit of the Stoics, immanent in nature, making the buds blossom into flowers, and boys grow into men; He is therefore Plato's Reason in the mind of God, as well as the wholly transcendent mighty One of Philo's thinking, dwelling by God's side from everlasting and

for evermore; and the holy, pure One of the Wisdom literature of the Jews, proceeding from God towards the children of men, delighting in them, reconciling them to God; their Light, their Life, their High Priest and Mediator—and all this so naïvely epitomised in one pregnant word!

No cultured reader would have been able to lay the book down and not be stunned by the ever-rolling tide of meaning which sweeps up to him from the bold words of the Prologue, with their majestic climax: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

We may even rejoice that the term has such a complex history, for we can feed our souls for ever on the infinite richness of its meaning.

Thou art the Everlasting Word,
The Father's only Son;
God manifestly seen and heard,
And Heaven's beloved One.

True image of the Infinite,
Whose essence is concealed;
Brightness of uncreated light,
The heart of God revealed.

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