

# Logos in Ancient Judaism

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*John 1:1-3 LGV*

*1 In the beginning was Logos, and Logos was with God, and Logos was God.*

*2 This one was in the beginning with God.*

*3 Everything originated through Him, and without Him nothing originated which has originated.*

The meaning of “Logos” (Word) in John 1:1 is one of the most hotly disputed points of Christian theology. Entire theological systems hinge on this, including both Trinitarianism and Unitarianism. Most Christians believe that the Apostle John’s use of “Logos” as a name for the Son of God was first introduced in the above passage, and that it was unique to him. That “Logos” is a personal name for Jesus Christ is flatly stated by John in Revelation: *“And His name is called Logos of God.”*<sup>1</sup> However, the Apostle Paul was the first to use the term “Logos” for the Son of God, as we will see.

John’s writings must not be viewed in isolation, but must be understood as reinforcing Paul’s teaching. Paul first evangelized Asia Minor, establishing many local assemblies. He spent time there on his first missionary journey reasoning in the synagogue on the Sabbath.<sup>2</sup> He visited Ephesus again on his second missionary journey. Upon finding twelve Jewish disciples of John the Baptist, he re-baptized them in the name of Jesus. He continued reasoning in the synagogue for three months until he was no longer welcome. *“But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.”*<sup>3</sup> Paul’s impact and outreach from Ephesus was extensive, as can be seen by the reaction of the idol-makers. *“Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands.”*<sup>4</sup> On his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Ephesus to warn the elders of the coming apostasy.<sup>5</sup> By this time, there were at least several elders of the mature Ephesian assembly. Due to Paul’s extensive work

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. 19:13

<sup>2</sup> Acts 18:19-21

<sup>3</sup> Acts 19:9-10

<sup>4</sup> Acts 19:25-26

<sup>5</sup> Acts 20:17-38

there, Ephesus had become the central hub of Christianity in the region. Yet the core of the Ephesian assembly was Jewish, as was its leadership.<sup>6</sup>

After Paul's martyrdom at Rome about AD 66, the Apostle John assumed the role of guiding the assemblies of Asia Minor, taking up his residence at Ephesus. His mission was to reinforce Paul's teaching, and to ward off the encroaching heresies that Paul warned the elders about. John's Gospel and three epistles gave further apostolic authority and eyewitness testimony concerning Jesus' own teaching and in support of what Paul had taught them. Thus, John's role of reinforcing Paul after his death must be accounted for in any accurate understanding of John's Gospel, including his prologue and use of the term "Logos."

It should also be noted that Paul's use of "Logos" for Jesus Christ appears in the book of Hebrews, addressed to a Jewish audience not a Greek one.

*Hebrews 4:12-14 LGV*

*12 For **Logos of God** is alive, and effective, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating until the distribution of both life and breath, of both joints and sinews, and is the Judge of inner sentiments and thoughts of the heart.*

*13 And nothing created is imperceptible in **His** sight, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of **Him, the one** unto whom we report.*

*14 Having then a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens – **Jesus the Son of God** – we should cling to the Profession.*

The clause, "Logos of God" (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ) is exactly the same as John's much later statement in Revelation 19:13, "And His name is called **Logos of God.**"

While scholarship has sometimes attributed John's use of "Logos" to Plato's use of the term for God's abstract thought, reason, or plan, it is extremely difficult to imagine that John was borrowing from Plato. Rather, since both Paul and John were Jews, and Paul's initial use of this term was addressed to Jews in Hebrews, and John was a member of the Ephesian assembly which was begun from the synagogue, we should look for a Jewish precedent for the use of this term not a Greek-pagan one.

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<sup>6</sup> This fact is evident from the fact that the Ephesian assembly began as an offshoot from the synagogue. It is also evident from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, where in chapter 1 he first spoke of the benefits of God's grace on Israel, using first person plural pronouns in vss. 3-12, referring to "we, having before hoped in the Christ" (vs. 12). This is contrasted with the "you also" (second person plural) statements beginning in verse 13, referring to the Gentile members of the Ephesian assembly.

Philo of Alexandria was a Jewish writer who lived from 20 BC to AD 40. Secular scholars have traditionally classed him as a Platonist, holding a kind of syncretism of Jewish and Greek Platonic thought. However, later scholarship is more nuanced, claiming that Philo's concept of Logos was quite different from Plato's. Philo gives us a glimpse into the Jewish mind of the western diaspora just before the time that Christianity began to reach into these diaspora synagogues.

It is very hard to deny that both Paul and John depended heavily on the same kind of contemporary Jewish thinking and vocabulary concerning Logos as is found in Philo's works. Below are two quotes from Philo which illustrate this similarity of language.

*"And even if there be not as yet anyone who is worthy to be called a son of God, nevertheless let him labour earnestly to be adorned according to His **first-begotten Word**, the eldest of His Angels, as the great Archangel of many names; for he is called, the authority, and the name of God, and **the Word**, and man according to God's image, and He who sees Israel. For which reason I was induced a little while ago to praise the principles of those who said, 'We are all one man's Sons.' For even if we are not yet suitable to be called the sons of God, still we may deserve to be called the children of His eternal image, of His most sacred **Word**; for the image of God is His **most ancient Word**."<sup>7</sup>*

It is important to understand that Philo's works were already well-known among the Greeks and diaspora synagogues where the Apostles were taking the Gospel. Thus, the language used by Paul and John in their written works would necessarily be viewed through the current understanding of this terminology in the synagogues.

*Col. 1:15-18 LGV*

*15 He is the image of the God who is unseen, **first-produced of all creation**,*

*16 because through Him everything was created, what is in the heavens and what is on the land, the seen and the unseen (including thrones, dominions, principalities, and authorities). Everything has been created through Him and for Him.*

*17 And He is before everyone, and everything has stood together in Him.*

*18 And He is the head of the Body (the assembly), **who is The Beginning**, first-produced out from among the dead, so that in everything He should become the prototype.*

In another book, Philo writes the following:

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<sup>7</sup> Philo, "On the Confusion of Tongues," XXVIII, 146-147

*“And the Father who created the universe has given to His Archangelic and **most ancient Word** a pre-eminent gift, to stand on the confines of both, and separated that which had been created from the Creator. And this same **Word** is continually a suppliant to the immortal God on behalf of the mortal race, which is exposed to affliction and misery; and is also the Ambassador, sent by the Ruler of all, to the subject race. And the **Word** rejoices in the gift, and, exulting in it, announces it and boasts of it, saying, ‘And I stood in the midst, between the Lord and you;’ neither being uncreated as God, nor yet created as you, but being in the midst between these two extremities. ...”<sup>8</sup>*

Philo, as a Jew seeking to explain Judaism in a very Greek culture, had a great deal of influence. His writings were known by the Greek intellectuals and the Diaspora synagogues while the Gospel was spreading to the Greek world. At the same time, John, an Apostle of Christ, wrote his Gospel and epistles for the same audience, to confirm Paul's teaching to them. Consequently, there is only one way that John's audience would understand the prologue of his Gospel:

*John 1:1-3 LGV*

*1 In the beginning was Logos (the Word), and Logos was with God, and Logos was God.*

*2 This one was in the beginning with God.*

*3 Everything originated through Him, and without Him nothing originated which has originated.*

Philo also commented on Gen. 31:13, which reads as follows in the LXX.

*Genesis 31:13 LXX*

*13 **I am God that appeared to thee in the place of God** where thou anointedst a pillar to me, and vowedst to me there a vow; now then arise and depart out of this land, depart into the land of thy nativity, and I will be with thee.*

Philo's remarks on this passage are as follows:

*“But it is not right for the man who anchors on the hope of the alliance of God to crouch and tremble, to whom God says, **I am the God who was seen by thee in the place of God.**’ A very glorious boast for the soul, that God should think fit to appear to and to converse with it. And do not pass by what is here said, but examine it accurately, and see whether **there are really two Gods**. For it is said: ‘I am the God who was seen by thee;’ not in my place, but in the place of God, as if he meant of some other God. What then ought we to say? There is one true God only: but they who are called Gods, by an abuse of*

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<sup>8</sup> Philo, “Who Is the Heir of Divine Things,” XLII, 205-206

language, are numerous; on which account the Holy Scripture on the present occasion indicates that it is the true God that is meant by the use of the article, the expression being, 'I am the God (ὁ Θεὸς),' but when the word is used incorrectly, it is put without the article, the expression being, 'He who was seen by thee in the place,' not of the God (τοῦ Θεοῦ), but simply 'of God (θεοῦ)'; **and what he here calls God is his most ancient Word**, not having any superstitious regard to the position of the names, but only proposing one end to himself, namely, to give a true account of the matter."<sup>9</sup>

It was within this kind of Jewish thinking (within a Greek culture) that Jesus prayed to the Father:

*John 17:3*

*3 Yet this is the age-enduring life: that they may know You, **the only True God**, and the one whom You sent, Jesus the Anointed.*

And Paul writes:

*1 Cor. 8:4-6 NKJV*

*4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that **there is no other God but one**.*

*5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords),*

*6 yet **for us there is one God, the Father**, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.*

That there is ONE God, the sole Sovereign over all things, is without question. Paul's acknowledgement that "there are many gods and many lords" was an acknowledgement of the fact that even the Scriptures themselves use the term "God" in reference to pagan gods, and even men who were rulers of God's people.<sup>10</sup> This was also true of the Son in both the Old and New Testaments as Paul's quote of Psalm 45 in Hebrews 1:8-9 proves. Philo noted this fact in the Jewish Scriptures. The New Testament writers continued to follow this same precedent from those Scriptures.

Thus, the Father is "THE GOD," the "SOVEREIGN OVER ALL."<sup>11</sup> The Son is "God" in a lesser sense, since His authority does not come from His own Person, but is granted to Him by the Father.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Philo, On Dreams, xxxix

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 82

<sup>11</sup> Rev. 1:8

This is the kind of monotheism that was common among Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora at the time of Christ. Jesus' claims of being the Son of God, having come down from heaven, having seen Abraham, having actually seen God, etc., were not of themselves shocking to the Jewish sense of monotheism. What was shocking was that this humble Man would apply such claims to Himself! Had Jesus affirmed the current Temple leadership instead of condemned them, and had led them in a revolt against Rome, they would have had absolutely no problem with these claims.

The most common and older viewpoint among scholars has been that Philo was a Jew who sought to reinterpret Judaism in the mold of Platonism. Thus he allegedly deviated significantly from current Judaism of the synagogues of the western diaspora. This kind of scholarship actually claims that Philo simply adopted Plato's ideas, put a Jewish spin on them, and that his works then greatly influenced both Paul and John, since his writings were extant among the Greeks when both Paul and John wrote. Both Apostles used language that was virtually identical to Philo who came before them, as is indicated in the above quotes. It is to this scholarship that Unitarians often appeal to make Philo a Platonist regarding the Logos. But they are strangely silent when the same scholarship follows this line of reasoning to its conclusion, that Paul and John were heavily influenced by Philo's Platonism.<sup>13</sup>

However, more recent scholarship characterizes Philo as a practicing Alexandrian Jew, living according to Jewish Law and attending the festivals at Jerusalem. Yet, having been educated in both Jewish and Greek thought, he attempted to educate the Greek intelligentsia concerning the superiority of Judaism, using language and concepts that they could understand and relate to. This is the correct viewpoint. The Encyclopedia Britannica offers the following assessment of Philo's statements concerning the Logos, that he differed significantly from Plato's teaching. For the Greeks, Philo was an original thinker among the Greeks of Alexandria as opposed to merely being a stooge of Plato, as Unitarians claim.

*"In the past, scholars attempted to diminish Philo's importance as a theological thinker and to present him merely as a preacher, but in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century H.A. Wolfson, an American scholar, demonstrated Philo's originality as a thinker. In particular, Philo was the first to show the difference between the knowability of God's existence and the unknowability of his essence. Again, in his view of God, Philo was original in insisting on an individual Providence able to suspend the laws of nature in contrast to the*

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<sup>12</sup> Matt. 28:18

<sup>13</sup> This earlier scholarship can be seen at the following website in the intro to Philo's works.  
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/philo/>

*prevailing Greek philosophical view of a universal Providence who is himself subject to the unchanging laws of nature. As a Creator, God made use of assistants: hence the plural "Let us make man" in Genesis, chapter 1. Philo did not reject the Platonic view of a preexistent matter but insisted that this matter too was created. Similarly, Philo reconciled his Jewish theology with Plato's theory of Ideas in an original way: he posited the Ideas as God's eternal thoughts, which God then created as real beings before he created the world.*

*Philo saw the cosmos as a great chain of being presided over by the Logos, a term going back to pre-Socratic philosophy, which is the mediator between God and the world, though at one point he identifies the Logos as a second God. Philo departed from Plato principally in using the term Logos for the Idea of Ideas and for the Ideas as a whole and in his statement that the Logos is the place of the intelligible world. **In anticipation of Christian doctrine he called the Logos the first-begotten Son of God, the man of God, the image of God, and second to God.**"<sup>14</sup>*

Note that Philo departed significantly from Plato's use of the term Logos. In Plato's works, Logos was abstract, first being right reason, and then the right communication of that reason. In Philo's works, however, Logos was a real divine Person. It is actually by employing Plato's abstract concept of Logos that Unitarians attempt to remove the obvious personal characterization of Logos in John 1:1-3. But this Platonic view of John's prologue cannot survive a careful analysis of the grammar.<sup>15</sup> Paul and John did not follow Plato. However, both Paul and John used language that was already current among the Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora concerning Logos, the "*first-produced of all creation*,"<sup>16</sup> and "*the Beginning of the creation of God*."<sup>17</sup> This terminology drawn from the Old Testament was already current in the synagogues (consistent with Philo's works, but not originating with him). Paul and John used this common vocabulary of Greek-speaking Jews in order to portray accurately what the Old Testament expectation was, and how it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, God's only-begotten Son.

It is somewhat hypocritical for Unitarians to appeal to the older scholarship concerning Philo in order to make him a stooge of Plato regarding the Logos in order to discredit him. Yet they bypass these same scholars who then insist that Philo heavily influenced Paul's and John's theology because they used the same language that was already well

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philo-Judaeus>

<sup>15</sup> See our article, "*Who or What is the 'Logos' in John's Prologue?*"

<http://www.4windsfellowships.net/articles/Logos.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Col. 1:15

<sup>17</sup> Rev. 3:14

known from Philo's works. If these sources prove that Philo was a Platonist regarding Logos, then Paul and John were also Platonists. Obviously, that is not the case since they were writing by inspiration and in John's case what he actually heard spoken by John the Baptist and Jesus.

To show that Philo's personal Logos, who was the agent of God, was neither unique or original to him but a commonly held Jewish concept, the Jewish Targums testify. These are Aramaic paraphrases and commentary of the Old Testament that were used in the synagogues of the eastern diaspora. The written forms<sup>18</sup> were preceded by oral tradition that is much older. The Targums are important to our quest because they provide an insight into the early synagogues that were not heavily influenced by Greek language or culture.

Here are a few examples of how Targums rendered important verses, showing that Logos was considered a second divine person, the agent of YHVH.

*Gen. 3:8 NKJV*

*8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*

*Gen. 3:8 (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, translated by J. W. Etheridge)*

*8 "And they heard the voice of **THE WORD** of the Lord God walking in the garden in the repose of the day; and Adam and his wife hid themselves from before the Lord God among the trees of the garden"*

*Genesis 19:24 NKJV*

*24 Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens.*

*Genesis 19:24 (Jerusalem Targum, translated by J. W. Etheridge)*

*24 "And **THE WORD of the Lord Himself** had made to descend upon the people of Sedom and Amarah showers of favour, that they might work repentance from their wicked works. But when they saw the showers of favour, they said, So, our wicked works are not manifest before Him. He turned (then), and caused to descend upon them bitumen and fire from before the Lord from the heavens."*

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<sup>18</sup> First century



This passage was used in exactly the same way by Justin to show to Trypho that a second God is clearly portrayed in Scripture. Justin did not invent this, and neither did Philo. It was taught in the Aramaic-speaking synagogues before the time of Christ.

*Exodus 20:1 NKJV*

*1 And God spoke all these words, saying:*

*Exodus 20:1 (Jerusalem Targum)*

*1 "And **THE WORD** of the Lord spake all the excellency of these words, saying."*

*Exodus 29:42-43 NKJV*

*42 "This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet you to speak with you.*

*43 "And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by My glory.*

*Exodus 29:42-43 (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan)*

*42 "A perpetual holocaust for your generations at the door of the tabernacle of ordinance before the Lord; where **I will appoint MY WORD to (meet) thee there, to speak with thee there.***

*43 And there **I will appoint MY WORD (to meet) with the sons of Israel,** and I will be sacrificed in their rulers for My glory"*

*Deut. 4:20 NKJV*

*20 "But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be His people, an inheritance, as you are this day.*

*Deut. 4:20 (Jerusalem Targum)*

*20 "For you hath **THE WORD** of the Lord taken for His portion, and hath brought you out from the iron furnace of Mizraim to be unto Him a people of inheritance as at this day."*

*Deut. 4:24 NKJV*

*24 "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."*

*Deut. 4:24 (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan)*

*24 "For **THE WORD** of the Lord your God is a consuming fire; the jealous God is a fire, and He avengeth Himself in jealousy."*

*Deut. 6:20-22 NKJV*

20 "When your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments which the LORD our God has commanded you?'

21 "then you shall say to your son: 'We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand;

22 'and the LORD showed signs and wonders before our eyes, great and severe, against Egypt, Pharaoh, and all his household.

*Deut. 6:20-22 (Targum, Pseudo-Jonathan)*

20 "When thy son, in time to come, shall ask thee, saying, What are the testimonies, statutes, and judgments which the Lord our God hath commanded you?

21 Then shall you say to your sons, We were servants to Pharaoh in Mizraim, and **THE WORD of the Lord brought us out of Mizraim with a mighty hand;**

22 and **THE WORD of the Lord wrought signs,** great wonders, and sore plagues on Mizraim and on Pharaoh and all the men of his house, which our eyes beheld;

It is not difficult to see that Logos was indeed seen as a personal being among the Aramaic-speaking synagogues of the east. And this was before Philo of Alexandria. Also, the Jewish Wisdom literature of the intertestamental period shows the same divine Person who was called Logos (Word) was also known by the name Sophia (Wisdom).<sup>19</sup> Thus, in both the east and west, in both Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking synagogues, "WORD" (Logos) and "Wisdom" (Sophia) were already understood to be proper names referring to a second divine figure who was the agent of God in creation, and who interacted with Israel directly on God's behalf, being the Son of God. This was the situation into which both Paul's and John's words were introduced.

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<sup>19</sup> See our article, "The Son of God as 'The Beginning' in Proverbs 8," [http://www.4windsfellowships.net/articles/Proverbs\\_8.pdf](http://www.4windsfellowships.net/articles/Proverbs_8.pdf)