

LOGOS

BY

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It is not unreasonable to try to discover why St John chose the Greek word 'logos' in describing the second person of the blessed Trinity to Greek-speaking converts. The only way to discover why is to see just what meaning it had in current speech to induce him to consider it suitable for his purpose; and to see secondly what modification or modifications he had to introduce into its meaning so that it really would fulfil its function as a key word in Trinitarian doctrine. We may find that its chief virtue was that it was, of all the terms to hand, least likely to be misunderstood.

The word 'logos' was used by Plato, the Stoics, Philo and Plutarch. It was current coinage in Greek thought, one of those words whose meaning was fluid enough, somewhat as democracy or liberty are in our politically-minded age. But at the back of all these interpretations or uses and shades of meaning of 'logos', there still remained one which may be summed up in another: reason. The philosophers all were seeking the reason for things; that was the Greek contribution to the world. Sometimes they expressed their findings as an inexorable Law within the universe, sometimes as the expression in God's mind of what this order should be. Never, so says Père Lagrange,¹ did they truly come to think of 'logos' as personified or as creative; it was always rather a rational aspect, either of God, or of the universe. But this was sufficient to tempt St John to choose it or at least not to discard it, as the word to describe Christ in his divine nature.

Obviously quite apart from the choice of this Greek word there is the other question: was the doctrine it was going to carry directly revealed to St John, or did he find it ready made, or nearly so? Clearly this was not the case among the Greeks, nor was it so in the Old Testament, despite some premonitions. It remains that Christ revealed the Trinity to the Apostles. How best to express it may have been left to their intelligence guided by the Holy Spirit.

That God's thought should be another person could not have occurred to the Greeks; this was something only knowable by revelation; but obscurely they had reached the idea—chiefly through the soaring minds of Plato and Aristotle—that God was thought. All John had to do was to allow no mistake to creep into the minds of his readers about the dualism of the universe, God and creation, and to show, not that Christ was the 'logos' in the universe—as the Stoics

¹ Cf. P. Lagrange's article 'Vers le Logos de St Jean' in *Revue Biblique*, 1923, p. 3.

would have it—not intelligence, separated from the universe by a great gulf fixed—as Aristotle would have it—not merely the Platonic exemplar, an aspect of the divinity, but the expression of God's thought, yes, and the cause as well as the exemplar of the order or reason in the universe.

By the time St John wrote his gospel the Church was far from being a Jewish sect, and no matter what the biblical echoes of the word 'logos' may have been, the ordinary current Greek use would be steadily before his readers' minds. Nor was his gospel so simple; it is a profound mystical work, and many of his readers would have been followers of the various schools of Greek thought. It therefore seems inconceivable that he should not have weighed using such a word in the light of its common significance, and consequently it is not out of place to see how suitably he did use it; his aim being to convert his Greek-thinking converts to the new Christian revelation. It was not a borrowing of Greek thought, but an expression of Christian revelation in Greek dress.

It is certain that for a stoic . . . there is nothing more divine than reason. The world is ruled by reason, it has developed by reason, it is maintained, it is what it is, being eternal, by the action of the rational principle. Man, the most noble thing in the world, is only man because of reason. His duty is to follow the right reason and only in so doing will he find happiness. Now reason is the Greek 'logos'. The 'logos' then is the principle and mover in all the stoic philosophy. . . . But we must know stoicism for what it is, a pure pantheism which does not allow of attributing to the 'logos' either the rôle of creator or that of an intermediary in creating, nor even of an exemplar of the world, nor even a divine supernatural force which communicates to man special lights.

Finally the equal use of 'logos' and 'nous' to mean the active principle, the predominance of 'logos' to mean the impersonal reason, the law, the moral code, and especially the survival of traditional religions, prevent us from considering the 'logos' as the metaphysical being 'par excellence' for signifying the active principle in the world, as though it had been in the popular mind a way of saying God or a great divine being.²

There is not the slightest indication that St John went into the pagan world to find this notion of 'word' in order to introduce it ready made into a thought that the revelation of Jesus Christ, Life, Light and Son of God had fashioned. Where would he have taken it from? and where do we find it such as he has given it to us? Nowhere, neither in Philo's school nor in stoicism. The philonic school and stoicism, if they did not play the part of origin, did they not perhaps at least that of stimulators or determinants? No one has the slightest idea. There is no shadow of a clue, no positive

² Lagrange, *Revue Biblique*, 1923, pp. 175-6.

indication. . . . If it were necessary to bring in some determining factor other than the 'suggestions' of the Holy Spirit, it were better to search in the thought and even in the language of the Old Testament. And perhaps quite simply in the traditional connection between the notions of life and the word of God, transported, in the light of the Gospel, into the full mystery of the relationship between the Father and the Son.³

No one would contradict these two eminent writers. They are at pains to show that St John did not pick up his doctrine from any of these Greek philosophers, Plato or Philo the Jew, or the stoics. What P. Lagrange and P. Lemonnyer are anxious to prevent is the possibility of anyone believing that St John found his doctrine among the Greeks and stole it, or that he found some of it, and that, by combination with his ideas, produced the final result we know. This is a very laudable aim, and its perfectly true end must be kept in mind. My aim is different. I say, let us start with the revelation of the Trinity, three Persons, yet one thing, and all three equal, then how are we best going to express this mystery? In the Greek language you will do it best, as St John has done, by taking over the word 'logos' which already had some analagous meanings; apply these meanings, modify them, and make them serve the purposes of Catholic theology. It is like a man preaching to modern scientists. He might say, 'You talk about a Law of Nature, certain principles in nature, you talk about God being a mathematician, having a mind. Up to a point you are right. But this law, this idea in the universe, is really distinct from the universe—which is mostly inert matter—and this principle, or idea, or law, created the universe; it is indeed God, God's idea, himself and yet the expression of himself'. Such a person would be taking the words out of the mouths of his hearers and giving them an infinitely deeper meaning, new meaning, without entirely stripping them of their original content. This is what St John was doing when under God's guidance he chose the word 'logos'.

Among the many problems there must have been two of outstanding importance that presented themselves to the apostles when trying to explain to the Graeco-Jewish world who Christ was. The first was: how to explain that Christ was God, and second: how to show that he was not God the Father, that there were two persons within one Godhead. The first problem was one for the Greeks, the second one especially for the Jews. For the Greeks had a very vague idea of God, though they had many gods; for the Jews the idea of God, and the unity of God, was so strong that any duality seemed blasphemy.

To have said that Christ was God would have put him in the category of the Emperors, who were being deified even before their

³ Lemonnyer, *La Théologie du Nouveau Testament*, p. 180.

death. St John had to find some expression which would lift up our Lord out of that world of human adulation into the world of metaphysics. He chose the word 'logos'. The reason for this is not far to seek for it was still sufficiently fluid in meaning not to falsify what he wanted to say, and yet not so untrue that it could not be baptised by a crystallising of one of its meanings.

In the Greek world the word 'logos' had come to be used as we have seen by the stoic philosophers to express the idea of underlying reasonableness in the world, the law inherent in the world's life. The manifestation of mind in things, the inevitableness in what happened. It had no sense of being creative, but merely factual. The idea in the universe, not a person outside causing the order, but just the logic of the thing itself.

In order to span the gap between the Greek mind and the Christian idea, St John had to take some idea intelligible to both. The word 'logos' was the span, the bridge. The Old Testament had very much the same idea in the Wisdom books. But whereas the Greek emphasis led to fatalism, an inevitability and a gloom unimaginable to a Christian, the Jews, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, when all trends round them were towards fatalism, preserved that vital principle of free will.⁴ Compare for instance:

'There is a deadly monotony about the cyclic motion of the cosmos — up and down, world without end . . . soon we shall be buried under the earth, and next the earth herself shall be transformed, and then whatever has arisen out of her transformation will undergo the same process again and again to infinity'. (Marcus. *Meditations*. Bk. 9 c. 28.)

and Philo:

'The divine plan ("logos") which is commonly called Chance makes its rhythmic movement in a cyclic course'. (Philo. *Quod Deus Immutabilis*.)

And Holy Scripture might seem to say something similar:

'The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun' (*Ecclesiastes* 1, 9.)

But though there is great similarity in language between the pagan philosophers and the Jewish sages, there is this difference: that in the latter the Personality of God underlies all and the free, moral action of men is retained. In the conclusion of this passage the mind of Ecclesiastes is made up upon the knotty problem of the apparently futile cyclic change ever repeating itself, which is all that

⁴ Cf. A. J. Toynbee, *Study of History*, vol. 4, p. 28.
Cf. P. Lagrange, *Revue Biblique*, 1923.

human wisdom can unaided see in man's history. He sums up this despairing view and concludes (ch. I, vv. 24-26):

Is it not better to eat and drink and to show his soul good things of his labours?

And this is from the hand of God (meaning that this is not fate but within the providence of God). God hath given to a man that is good in his sight, wisdom and knowledge and joy. (*Ecclesiastes* 4, 24-26.)

Where the writer clearly shows that true wisdom in this earth is not in knowledge alone but in right living, or good use of free will. So, after all, in *Ecclesiastes* we have a thought completely alien to the fatalism and determinism of the pagan outside world. He saw Wisdom as God's wisdom, guiding even when we do not understand, and also rewarding the good. Thus the 'logos' becomes not the Chance of Philo, but God himself, and, as the clouds lift and the sun of justice appears, this Wisdom is seen to be a distinct Person within the unity of the Godhead.

St John, then, is saying to his converts, 'You have this idea of wisdom or reason or rule or fate or order or logic in the world, but this is really distinct from the world. The world's order is only a reflection of a greater order and wisdom, which caused it: namely the wisdom of God. This wisdom or idea in God, this 'logos' IS GOD, was with him at the beginning before the world was; he made the world; and now at the end of the ages, he has come into this world in the form of a man, the Wisdom of God was made flesh; he, as it were, broke through the fatality you imagined. Fatality does not exist, Chance does not exist, but God's free wisdom does; here he is among us, and in us, Man and God'.

The problem for St John in regard to the Jews was not how to give them the idea of God. That was his problem with the average Greek—we speak not of the rare Aristotles and Platos. His Jewish problem was: how to present the true duality in the unity of the jealous God. The name of Son of God was freely used by Christ himself, he explained how he had come from the Father. This might lead either to the idea that the Son was only a demi-urge, or that there were two separate even if equal Gods. The nearest approach to a duality in unity that we know is the mind and its thought. The emanation of the mind is in the mind, is the mind thinking. Thus God's thought or logos is himself. In human thought there is a subordination, but in God where there can be no division of nature, no parts, what St Thomas calls 'conceptum intellectus',⁵ must be God and equal to God. Complete this by the doctrine of the love that springs from the knowledge and we have given us by sacred Scripture a wonderful insight

⁵ *Summa Theol.* I, 24, 1; or see the second article, 'emanatio intellectus'.

into the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Jewish writers had for more than a century been stressing the idea of God's wisdom or knowledge, as it were preparing the way for this greatest revelation that this very wisdom was distinct in Person from the Father who is eternally wise.

But apart from the comparison of our knowledge and the life in the Godhead, we maintain that there is real analogy. It is not like saying, perhaps, that a man is like a rock, he is firm in spirit as the rock is materially; there really is knowledge in God. God is truth. Christ is 'the Truth'; and God is Love. 'Deus Caritas est'. Such activities are the highest life we know, we can recognise the limitations of our form of them, and imagine more perfect forms. But God's possession of them must out-bound any dream of perfection we could conceive; yet he must possess this perfection. If we know, then God knows; if we love, then God loves. God is a spirit, and the life of the spirit is the light of truth and the flame of love. Thus 'logos' is no arbitrary title but a proper one of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.⁶

⁶ In English the first sentences of St John's Gospel give us only a faint idea of the depth of meaning in the Greek, the 'Word' having far less in it than 'logos'. Perhaps the word 'Wisdom' is our nearest equivalent. Thus, 'In the beginning was Wisdom and Wisdom was with God and Wisdom was God'. But even here there is danger of losing the point that Wisdom is a distinct person; and we have to admit that English is for once defeated to find a fitting word for him who is the Word, the 'logos'.