Parallelisms and revelatory concepts of the Johannine Prologue in Greco-Roman context

Introduction

Traditionally the prologue (πρόλογος) to John’s gospel has been interpreted as a passage that deals with the pre-existence of Christ and his subsequent incarnation. The headers added in several bible translations reflect this: ‘The Word Became Flesh’ (NRSV, NIV, ESV). Although this seems a valid conclusion on the basis of the contents of the text for readers of the 21st century, the Good News translation with its header ‘The Word of Life’ does greater justice to the communicative aspect of this passage. The central role of the Logos in communicating between God and humanity is confirmed by a philological analysis of John 1:1–18, read within the context of this gospel and its Greco-Roman world. A careful reading suggests that the author is proclaiming a cosmic theology of revelation, and presents the incarnation of Christ and his pre-existence with God as part of a revelatory process. John Ashton (2014:145–156) phrases this differently, but essentially suggests the same when he says (Ashton 2014:3) that the prologue is essentially about ‘God’s plan for humankind’, and not about creation as previously argued. Of course the latter is an important issue in the prologue, but its context is that of God revealing his plans. He does so as creator, and consequently in a special relationship with mankind. There are several arguments for this view.

In the first place, an analysis of the passage will show that the author distinguishes a source, message or messenger (Logos), and receiver (world or humanity) structure of the text suggests that John does not present the incarnation as a goal in itself but subservient to a communication aim. Generally speaking, this agrees well with the overall structure of this particular gospel, where revelation from God to humans on earth is a central thought.

In the second place, on a philological level, the author uses revelatory terminology for his key concepts, applying philological and religious parallelism to this end. This has parallels in the Qumran community. Daniel Harrington (2005):

For both groups the most important object of knowledge is God and God’s plan being unfolded in history. And the most effective way toward this knowledge is through divine revelation. (p. 136)

In the third place, it made sense to do it in this way because of the first historical context of the fourth gospel. Van Tilborg (1996) already firmly positioned John’s gospel in Ephesus in his ‘Reading John in Ephesus’. Although he mentions Apollo and the presence of his temples (Van Tilborg 1996:71, 94, 135–137, 159, 205), ‘Reading John in Ephesus’ does not include a treatment of the particulars of local worship, that of Phoebus Apollo. Peter Phillips mentions the Apollo
Parallelisms and revelatory concepts of John 1:1–18 in the context of the Gospel

In this section, the parallelisms and revelatory concepts of John 1:1–18 will be analysed philologically in the context of the gospel and wider Biblical literature. Following this analysis, the particular Greco-Roman context of John’s gospel, as suggested by the early Church, will be considered. Others have already worked on the direct textual context (1:19–2:12) and its revelatory aspects. Francis Martin and William Wright (2015:42–61) distinguish four days of revelation in chapter one (1:19–51) and a subsequent revelation of glory in chapter two (2:1–12).

**Logos**

John 1:1–18 is a passage about communication: ὁ λόγος, derived from speaking or communicating. Bauer, Aland and Aland (1988:968) see communication (das Sprechen) as the first meaning of λόγος. One should be aware that Koiné Greek often uses the definite article in a generic and not in a definitive way, as English and other modern European languages do. For this reason, a translation like ‘Communication’ would reflect the intention of the author for our day and age: ‘In the beginning was Communication, and Communication was with God, and Communication was God’. (v. 1) And likewise (v. 14): ‘And Communication took on a body and temporarily dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, a glory like one would expect the only begotten to have when he comes from his Father, full of grace and truth’. In the traditional Greek use of the term, λόγος may communicate (cf. Liddell & Scott 1996:1057–1059): value (1), correspondence or proportion (2), explanation (3), inward thoughts (4); or contain a narrative (5), a message or verbal expression (6), or a divine utterance (or an oath calling on the gods respectively). It may also refer to subject matter (8) or any speech (9). In biblical literature several traditional elements of λόγος come together in Christ as God’s representative agent. It is he who functions as the Word and Wisdom of God, through whom God creates the world and exercises government. He communicates God’s thoughts, commandments, and salvation to humanity (cf. Jn 1:1, 2, 7, Rev 19:13). Paul Anderson points to the similarity in syntax between the prologue and 1 John 1:1–5 (2008:329): ‘much of its language and syntax is closer to 1 John 1:1–5 than to the rest of the Gospel’.

The overall communicative emphasis of the prologue is hard to miss (Giblin 1985:89): ‘The author insists on the act of communication’. Although on a horizontal level, the term has seen some development in Greek philosophy, long before

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2. The Greek text used for the New Testament quotes in this article is Nestle Aland 28, while the Greek and Hebrew texts of Old Testament Scripture are from the current versions of the Septuagint and Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia published by the German Bible Society.

3. John 1:1–18.Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. Εἶπεν ὁ λόγος ἐν ἑντός τῆς φωτός, καὶ ἡ φωτία ἦν τὸν λόγον. ἤρθε δὲ ὁ λόγος εἰς τὸν κόσμον, καὶ ὁ κόσμος ἐκ τοῦ λόγου ἐλεημόσυνη ἐδέξατο καὶ οὐκ ἠνέκδικτον. ἔχει δὲ τὸ λόγον ἱστορίαν λεγόντα, ὅτι ἦν ὁ λόγος ἐν τῷ πλήρεις χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας; 5 ὡς τὸν λόγον ἐγίνετο πάντες πιστεύετε εἰς αὐτόν. 6 ὃς ἦν ἐκ τοῦ πλήρεις χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας γενόμενος εἶναι ἤρωυ ἐπήνευσεν καὶ ὁ λόγος ἐν τῷ πλήρεις χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας ἐγενόμενος ἐπιφάνειαν ἐπὶ τὸν Κόσμον καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ. 7 οὗτος ἦν ὁ ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ὡς ὁ λόγος ἐγένετο, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. 8 ὁ λόγος ἐν τῷ πλήρεις χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας γενόμενος ἐπιφάνειαν ἐπὶ τὸν Κόσμον καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ. 9 ἤνεκτος τοῦ φωτός ἐλεημόσυνην ἐσιν ἐστε ἤρωυ ἐπὶ τῷ πλήρεις χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός.
John’s gospel (Lincoln 1996:2), this is not relevant for its use in the prologue. The Gnostic use of λόγος as a spiritual principle applied to rid the soul of the bondage to the material world is likewise a different field of meaning (Van den Broek 1979:280).

From the Old Testament there is also particular association with divine commands in an oracular context, God speaking verbally to the people of Israel (e.g. The Decalogue, cf. Ex 20, 34:28 LXX). When God speaks, obedience is called for. This aspect also strongly reflects in the Gospel according to St. John (cf. John 15:10–20). God’s λόγος requires human response and discipleship. There is also a revelatory aspect in the activities of the λόγος. In the words of John 1:18: ‘No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’. What would be otherwise inaccessible is made known and communicated from God through the λόγος. The term goes hand in hand with Revelation and obedience in the writings of the New Testament (cf. Mt 15:6, Mk 7:13, Jn 5:38, 8:55, 10:35, Rm 3:4). Like Moses, the Logos acts as God’s agent, but is at the same time more than that.1

Communicator creator

John 1:1 explains the origin of the λόγος in place and time, as something literally out of this material world. He points to the ultimate prehistory of Genesis 1:1; even then, God’s λόγος already existed. Although two different ideas about the generation of the Logos prevailed in early Christianity,2 both agreed that he was there before time and perception started for human beings. Nothing was created without him, 1:3: πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἐν ὁ γέγονεν. This connection between the Logos and Creation is extensively treated by Masanobu Endō (2002). The echo from Genesis 1 is reinforced by the use of ἐν ἀρχῇ (1:1–2) and ἐγένετο (1:3), reminiscent of God who spoke in the beginning and it was. The Logos’s place of residence is ‘with God’ (πρὸς τὸν θαύμα) – that is, effectively, heaven; although for the writer of John’s gospel ‘with God’ suffices as location. One observes the same generic use of the article in πρὸς τὸν θαύμα as in ὁ λόγος. Subsequently, the Word is identified with the only true God himself (καὶ θαύμα ἕν ὁ λόγος).

Logos was God. One observes that in all respects (time, origin, and identity) the λόγος belongs to the realms of God, not to the cosmos or this world. It is divine communication from the realms of glory that is going to arrive in this world in a personal way.

Logos, light, and revelation

The divine communication is aimed at reception. God’s communication process through the Logos is not general, but specific. It is aimed at earth, the world of humanity. It facilitates communication between two parties: God and the children of Adam.

The use of the word ‘light’ is significant. In the Johannine communication process, light and revelation go together (Borgen 1972:115–130). The parallelism between λόγος, φῶς and ύπόστασις is worth observing. The Logos provides light in the darkness. The light reveals what would otherwise remain unseen. Just as the plants and trees receive the life-giving light of the sun and grow as a result, the λόγος shines in the spiritual darkness of humanity to provide, not only light, understanding, and direction, but also life and inherent energy.

This connection of light and Word is a very old concept, which is found in the very beginning of the Torah. The first words of God in Genesis concern the creation of light. God speaks and light comes forth:

Genesis 1:3–5 (LXX): καὶ ἐδάφει ὁ θεὸς Γενεθλίων φῶς, καὶ ἐγένετο φῶς, καὶ ἐδάφι ὁ θεὸς τὸ φῶς ὁμοίως τῷ θαύματι τοῦ δρακόντος καὶ ἠδορήσατο ὁ θεὸς τὰ τρία μόνον τῶν φαντάσματος καὶ ἀνά μόνον τῶν σκόπων. (And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good, and God divided between the light and the darkness.)

Light is created and intended for creatures. Darkness belongs to the uniformed state and the earliest beginnings of the creation of the world. It is only when God speaks that light appears. Divine Word and light go together. The creation connection of the Johannine Logos and Genesis is prominent. Paul Anderson (2008) writes:

From the creation narratives of Genesis 1–3, the Logos motif can be seen as rooting in the creative-redemptive work of Yahweh, whose life-producing Word brought forth the created world and the breath of life itself. (p. 332)

After Genesis 1, one has to continue reading well into Exodus before light (φῶς/φῶς) returns with any theological significance, or at all. This happens when ‘Israel was in Egypt’s land’, during the episode of the Ten Plagues. The king was not prepared to do without the slave labour of the Israelites for his favourite projects. Through the hand of Moses, God punishes Pharaoh and his people with pitch-black darkness. He takes away his light and leaves the Egyptians in a state not dissimilar to the world before God spoke his creative words (Gn 1:1–3):

Exodus 10:22–23 (LXX): ἔλεησεν δὲ Μωυσῆς τὴν χείρα εἰς τὸν όμορφον, καὶ ἐγένετο σκότος γῆς ἑκάστη ἑκάστῳ τῆς Ἀιγύπτου τρεῖς ἡμέρας, καὶ οὐκ εἶδεν οὐδὲ τῶν τοιούτων τρεῖς ἡμέρας, καὶ οὐκ έξελέωσεν οὐδεὶς έκ τῆς κοίτης αὐτοῦ τρεῖς ἡμέρας πάντα δὲ τοῖς υἱοῖς Ισραήλ ἤδη ἐν τοῖς τρισέτεσσιν αἰώνασι τετέλεσαν. (And Moses stretched out his hand to heaven, and there was darkness very black, even a storm over all the land of Egypt three days. And for three days no man saw his brother, and no man rose up from his bed for three days: but all the children of Israel had light in all the places where they were.)

The author takes responsibility for indented translations from the Septuagint and classical authors, but acknowledges dependence on Brenton (1994) and Perseus Project Texts Loaded under PhiloLogic Greek and Latin Morphology (2010).
Significantly, the Israelites continue to enjoy God’s light, whereas the Egyptians are no longer able to distinguish the world around them. It affects relationships (no one could see his brother for three days: καὶ οὔς ἕξεν οὐδεὶς τὸν ἄδελφον αὐτοῦ τρεῖς ἡμέρας) as well as productivity (nobody left his sleeping quarters for three days: οὐδὲν ἐκ τῆς κοίτης αὐτοῦ τρεῖς ἡμέρας). The Hebrew Bible suggests thickness dark (BHS: קָרָאָבָא, carrying the literal meaning of ‘darkness of concealment’) only, without mentioning the storm, which could point to a supernatural darkness for the Egyptians and a supernatural light for the children of Israel, arguably similar to when God created light before the sun, moon, and stars came into being (cf. Gn 1). This theory would presume light in Goshen and supernatural darkness across the provincial border, as it were. Although this line of thought would reinforce the spiritual significance of the passage, it is perhaps not the most likely interpretation. Even for the Genesis passage, light might not be a supernatural occurrence. Its original light (in Gn 2:2) seems to refer to the creation of light as a phenomenon, while afterwards material producers (sun, moon, stars) and finally perception of light (fish, birds, animals, humans) are put in place.

If the Septuagint translation (3rd century BC) is any indication, early Jewish tradition did not read supernatural darkness and light into Exodus 10:22–23. This was at a time when Hebrew and Greek were not dead languages as yet and the Septuagint translators spoke both languages fluently. They acknowledge that the darkness is a punishment from God, but point the reader to a secondary cause: a heavy storm, a hurricane (θύελλα, ὄρθις). It was the wind which produced the darkness by heaping up clouds and dust. In the Torah, primary (spiritual) and secondary (material) causes are all a natural part of the same world view. One often finds similar situations. To the Septuagint author’s mind, there is no doubt that God opened the Sea, but he is also convinced that this happened instrumentally by a strong wind from the East (Ex 14:21, cf. 13:17–14:29). Similarly, in this earlier context of Exodus 10:22–23, there is no reason to presume a supernatural source of darkness, or of light with the Israelites, for that matter. Moses lifted his hand to heaven, the storm raged as God responded, and Egypt was covered in darkness. Just as the immediate cause for the darkness was a hurricane, sweeping up dust and driving dark packs of cloud over the country, the light in the houses (lit. ἐν πάσῃ, οἷς κατεγίνοντο) of the Israelites may have come from oil lamps, as the Israelites were forewarned by Moses and prepared for the event.

Primary and secondary causes aside, for the author it is ultimately God who causes darkness for the disobedient, taking away creation blessings from the Egyptians; and who also continues to provide light for his people. The light of the Egyptians was concealed by darkness, but just as God’s light once overcame the darkness of the unformed world (Gen 1:2: δὲ ἐξ ἁπάντα εἶχεν, ὃς δὲ κατασκεύαστος, καὶ σκότος ἐπάνω τῆς θάλασσας, without form and empty, while darkness was over the abyss), he now judges his enemies and provides light for his people, the children of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The light of the world, the lux mundi presented by John in the fourth gospel, has similar traits. In the prologue the darkness of the world and the antagonistic welcome that the Logos is about to receive, recall the pre-creation state of the world as well as God’s later judgements. Although John does not specifically mention the Fall, he describes a fallen world, which is in need of God’s recreation that will provide life and light. Although the darkness of this present, fallen cosmos may be thick and gloomy, it will be unable to overcome the light of the Logos (καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτοῦ οὐ κατέλαβεν).

This connection between Word and light is also particularly prominent in the Old Testament wisdom literature. When God speaks, humans receive insight, moral direction, and spiritual guidance for their situation. This was also the Jewish experience of the written Word of God as it was passed from one generation to the next. For instance:

Psalm 119 (118 LXX) 103–105: ὡς γλούσσα τὰς λάρυγγας μου τὰ λόγια σου, ὑπερέχει μέλι καὶ κηρύγμα τὸ στόμα μου, ἀπὸ τῶν ἐντολῶν σου συνεῖχα διὰ τὸ τοῦτο ἐμὴν ἐμπεσαν ὁδὸν ἀδικίας. Λόγος τούτος ποιήσαι μνεῖν μόνο τοῦ λόγου σου καὶ φύσις ταῦτα τρίβοις μου. [How sweet are your oracles to my throat! more than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding by your commandments: therefore I have hated every way of unrighteousness. Your law is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my paths.]

Logos source of life

Johns describes the Logos as the source of life: ἐν αὐτῷ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ἥν ην τὸ φῶς τῶν ανθρώπων (v. 4). This threefold parallelism of Word, light, and life is also found in the Old Testament wisdom literature. The God who creates also provides life through his breath and light for his creatures (Anderson 2008:332) to distinguish the world around them. Thus, he enables them to interact with their environment both intelligently and spiritually:

Proverbs 6:23: ὅτι λόγος ἐντολὴ νόμου καὶ φῶς, καὶ ὁ δόσις ἔλεγχος καὶ παιδεία. [For the commandment of the law is a lamp and a light; a way of life; reproof also and correction.]

As breath is used for speaking, God spoke and there was life; and his life-giving breath made Adam a living soul. The Wisdom of Solomon (ΣΟΦΙΑ ΣΛΑΔΜΩΝΩΣΙΣ, included in the Septuagint) elaborates on this parallelism:

Wisdom 7:24–25: πάσης γὰρ κινήσεως κινητακότητα σοφία, δήκη δὲ καὶ χωρὶς διὰ πάντων διὰ τὴν καθαρότητά αὐτῆς γένος τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ δυνάμεως καὶ ἀπόρροια τῆς τοῦ παντοκράτορος δόξης εὐκρατείας διὰ τὸ σοῦ δόσθεν, mēmemménon εἰς αὐτὴν χωρηMess υμῖς. [For wisdom is more moving than any motion: she passes and goes through all things by reason of her pureness. For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore can no defined thing fall into her. For she is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness.]

The Wisdom of Solomon also reflects on the darkness in Egypt and the light that was provided for God’s people. It also spiritualises the imagery of the desert journey of the Israelites as God gave the Israelites a light (column of fire) by night and cloud coverage against the rays of the sun by day.
God’s guidance is the overall aim of these provisions. The Egyptians, by contrast, were deprived of light and imprisoned by darkness, showing God’s judgment and echoing the pre-creation state of the world before the Logos changed it during the six days of creation;

Wisdom 18:1–4: Τοις δὲ σιωπὰς που μέγεθος ὦ θεσίν ἡ φως ἐν φωνῇ μὲν ἀκούστῳς μορφὴν δὲ οὐ τράγης ὀν ἐν κάκειν ἐπιπάντεσαν, ἐμακάριος ὡς ἐξίπτωσεν προφητήματαν, ἀντιλήπτων καὶ τοῦ διευθύναντος χώραν ἐλέασεν. ἀνθ᾽ ὧν προφηλαγίσαν παρ᾽ ἐνδυής μὲν ἀγνόστης ἔνδοσιμης, ἦλθο δὲ ἀβιβλιστὸς φυλάττων ἐνεπεργής, ἄμοιν μὲν γὰρ ἑκάστῳ σφηνίζει φως καὶ φανερατείς σκέπης οἱ κατακλεύστων φιλαύλης τῶν υἱῶν σου, δι᾽ ὃν ἤμελλεν τὸ ἀπόφορον νόμον φῶς τοῦ αἰῶνον διδάσκει. [Nevertheless your saints had a very great light, whose voice they hearing, and not seeing their shape, because they also had not suffered the same things, they counted them happy. But for that they did not hurt them now, of whom they had been wronged before, they thanked them, and besought them pardon for that they had been enemies. Instead whereof you gave them a burning pillar of fire, both to be a guide of the unknown journey, and a harmless sun to entertain them honourably. For they were worthy to be deprived of light and imprisoned in darkness, who had kept your sons shut up, by whom the incorrupt light of the Law was to be given unto this generation.]

The end of the passage mentions the Word of God, as the Israelites were entrusted with the Law that God initially wrote with his own finger and gave to Moses (Ex 31:18). The phrase φυλακθηθήναι σκέπησα seems to reflect on the Egyptian darkness as a judgment on the world that prefers to live without him, but focuses on the Law providing permanent light for God’s people. The words τὸ υἱῶν are sometimes translated ‘world’ (e.g., Brenton), but in this context it would be truer to the proper sense of ‘lifetime’ or ‘age’ to translate with ‘generation’, as it is righteous people, ‘sons of God’ (τοὺς υἱῶν σου), whom the writer has in mind.

The light of God gives insight and understanding. This is also a dominant thought in the closing words of Jesus Sirach. Just before the final hymn (chapter 51) he concludes his teachings with the words:

Sirach 50:28–29: μακάρις οὖς ἐν τοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀναφέρεσθαι, καὶ θεῖς αὐτῶν καὶ κυρίων αὐτῶν σωροθετήσεν ἐνάντια ἀνάλοιπα παρὰ ἐναντίον ἧς φως κυρίων τὸ ἱερός αὐτῶν. [Blessed is he that shall be exercised in these things; and he that stores them in his heart shall become wise. If for someone does he them, shall he have strength to all things: for the light of the Lord shows his track.]

In a way similar to Wisdom and Sirach, in John’s gospel the light in the Word also equals life for men: ζωὴ ἦν ἡ φῶς καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν (v. 4). Jesus becomes the light-giving Reveal, as he is often referred to in post-Bultmanian scholarship (Bultmann 1941). The parallelism between Word, light, and life is an integral part of the fourth gospel, perhaps reaching its climax in John 8:12. There the Logos proclaims himself directly as the ‘light’ of the world to disperse darkness. Those who will follow him will not walk in darkness but have light of ‘life’ (ἔχει εἰμί τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου ὁ ἀκούσων ἔμοι οὐ μὴ παραπάτηση ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ, ἀλλ᾽ ἔχει τὸ φῶς τῆς ζωῆς). See also John 9:5, 12:46.

Identification and communication with humanity

Primary communication: Incarnation

The incarnation in itself has some parallel qualities, Logos and Sarks at the same level, a Creator who comes to his creatures (1:11 εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἔδωκε, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτοῦ οἱ παράλειβαν). In doing so, he asserts a claim of ownership and authority. The Logos has ownership claims on both the created world and humanity: these and they are his. This also contains an antithetical parallelism at a philological level: τὰ ἴδια versus οἱ ἴδιοι, implying rejection of ownerships-rights and rebellion in the human sphere of οἱ ἴδιοι. This antithetical parallelism is continued in the human reception of the Logos in verse twelve: οἱ παράλειβαν versus ἔδωκε (1:12 ὦποί ἐδώκεν αὐτοῖς εὑρεσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύσοντες εἰς τὸ όνομα αὐτοῦ). The ability to receive is subsequently referred to as only possible through divine instigation (1:13 οἱ εἰς οἴκαις γένος ἀνθρώπων εἰς θελήματος ἀκολουθοῦν: he true light provides understanding and ability to distinguish to all people. It is not unlike the general benevolence of God as heavenly father, which is displayed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:45: ὅτι τὸν ἤλεγχε γένος τοῦ ποιμένος ἢμῶν τὸν ἔν εἰρήνης, ὅτι τὸν ἤλεγχε γένος αὐτοῦ ἄνατελλε ἐπί πονηρῶς καὶ ἰκανοῖς καὶ βρέχει ἐπὶ δικαίους καὶ ἀδίκους.).

In the Logos, however, the light doesn’t just come up in an impersonal way for all people who happen to find themselves on the bright side of the earth, as in the imagery of Matthew 5:45. Here in John, the picture is far more intimate. Not only is the light of the Logos specifically aimed at humanity, the Logos also becomes part of humanity himself. It is the incarnate Word who is going to speak God’s message and provide light and life to those who hear. God identifies himself permanently with humanity by becoming a permanent part of it through taking on the body of a man. According to John, the Logos was interacting with this world from the start, but now he is going to come closer than ever: Καὶ ὁ λόγος σαρκὶ ἐγένετο.

The Logos took on a human body and in this sense the author of John’s gospel has a permanent identification of the Word with humanity in mind. Even after the resurrection, the Logos continues to have a body, capable of eating and drinking (cf. John 21). Still the prologue indicates that the bodily presence of the Logos is only for a while: καὶ ἐπεζήσατο ἐν ἠμῖν. He put up his tent, lived in this region for some time, but then
packed up and travelled on, like Abraham and the patriarchs of old. The picture is also reminiscent again of the desert journey of the Israelites. God provided light through the fiery column, but it was only for the duration of the journey. And God’s actual presence resided in the tent of witness, the tabernacle. Whenever God’s light and cloud directed the Israelites to move on, the tent was unpitched. In a similar way the incarnate Logos of John’s gospel did not come to stay. On earth. Although the fourth gospel does not mention the Ascension specifically, it is implied by the temporary residence that is not only indicated by the prologue, but by several other passages throughout the gospel.

**Primary communication: the work of father and spirit**

The intimacy also reflects in the anticipated reception and rejection of the Logos. Unlike the sunlight, which shines on all people indiscriminately, his light is not automatically received. This constitutes a central line of thought in John’s gospel. Only those who are born of the Spirit will make the connection (cf. John 3), but the idea is also stressed elsewhere in the gospel. Miller (1993):

No doubt the best summary of the centrality and power with which ‘word’ functions in the fourth gospel is at 6:63: ‘It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life’. (p. 452)

In John’s gospel regeneration or re-creation is an activity in which Father, Son, and Spirit participate. No one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him ((John 6:44). Those who the Father gives to him will draw near (Jn 6:37–39). Disciples don’t choose Jesus, but Jesus chooses them and causes his disciples to bear fruit (15:16 σὺς ὑμεῖς με ἐξελέξασθε, ’all’ ἐγὼ ἐξελέξαμην ὑμᾶς καὶ θέθηκα ὑμᾶς ἵνα καρπῶντες καὶ κορίτσια φέρητε καὶ ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ οὐκ οἶδεν ποῦ ἐγένετο ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν. (v. 16)). This thought of spiritual rebirth is particularly reflected in verse 13: ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ οὐκ οἶδεν ποῦ ἐγένετο ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν. (v. 13). No one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him. Those who welcome the Logos and his light into their life become part of God’s family. According to verse 12: ὅσοι δὲ ἐλαβον αὐτόν, οὗτοι αὐτοῖς ἐξοσιάζονται τάξιν θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τὰς πιστεύσεις εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ. Although the incarnation of the Logos was in the form of a man – an image of the active creator – he was born from a woman. The subsequent spiritual work in humanity, however, is without special discernment of sex: boys and girls (τάξιν).
their guidance cannot remain in darkness. John 12:46: ἐγὼ φῶς εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἔλθα, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεῦσιν εἰς ἐμὲ ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ μὴ μαίνη. Spiritual light is received by paying heed to Jesus’s message (e.g. 12:47: καὶ έάν τίς τις μοι ἀκούση τῶν γρήγορων καὶ μὴ φυλάξῃ). Friendship with Jesus is described in terms of obeying his commandments (15:14: ύμεῖς φίλοι μοι ἐστέ έάν ποιήτε ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομα ὑμῖν). Although John doesn’t use the actual phrase ‘kingdom of God’ often (cf. 3,3, 18:36), in this respect the fourth gospel is not different from the other gospels and Acts in its emphasis on the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The Logos is both Creator and Lord, who is presented as the Son of God and the King of Israel (cf. 1:50, 12:13–15, 19:12–15). This echoes the Mosaic notion that light is produced and presented not merely for human convenience, but that God should be pleased. In other words: not just a witness to humanity, but particularly also witness and ceremonial service before God, whether it affects humans in any way being of a secondary concern. In Exodus the Aaronic priesthood was commanded to have a perpetual light, fuelled by high grade olive oil, before the ark in the ‘tabernacle of testimony’ (Ex 27:20–21). This was to be a perpetual light, eternally burning from one generation to the next. Interestingly, there is an early tradition that places the apostle John in this priestly tradition, probably even wearing the oracular ephod (H.E. 3.31.2–3, cf. 3.39.6). John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and being a priest wore the sacerdotal plate. He also sleeps at Ephesus.7

Parallelisms and revelatory concepts of John 1:1–18 in their Greek cultural context

Early church: John in Greco-Roman culture of Ephesus region

The previous section considered the prologue in the textual context of the fourth gospel and Biblical Literature. An analysis showed the Logos to function as Creator and Revealer, while diverse parallel communicative levels or spheres of function were identified. However, the revelatory concepts of John 1:1–18 have a non-literary context as well, in the historical Greco-Roman environment where the gospel was written (cf. Irenaeus Adversus Haereses 3.1–2, Eusebius Historia Ecclesiastica 3.1, 3.20.10–11).8

Much has been written about the Roman imperial cult and the hardships implied for John’s readership in Asia Minor (e.g. Cassidy 2015:21), R.J. Apart from this, the cultural setting for this gospel was Greek.

Eusebius also quotes a tradition preserved in Clemens of Alexandria, which points to a continued ministry in Ephesus after John’s exile at Patmos (H.E. 3.23.6–7). According to Polycarp (Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica 4.14.6) John was in the habit of visiting bath houses with his Christian friends, embracing Greco-Roman culture in that respect.9

One of John’s motivations for also writing a gospel account apparently was that he felt that he had more stories to share on the life of Jesus before the execution of John the Baptist (H.E. 3.24.11–14). These first acts that Eusebius refers to (τὰ πρῶτα τῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πράξεων) in sharing John’s motivation to write his Gospel, the creative deeds of the Logos before all time, as well as his incarnation, seem to have been part of the Apostle’s considerations.10

Quoting from a letter by Polycrates (c. 130–196 AD) to Victor, Eusebius also places John’s death and burial in Ephesus (H.E. 3.31.2–3, cf. 3.39.6).

This cursory overview shows that the earliest Christian sources point to a Greco-Roman context for the fourth gospel. About Ephesus they are as unanimous as they are old (2nd century) and geographically spread: Western Europe (Irenaeus), Asia Minor (Polycrates), and Egypt (Clemens Alexanderinus). Otherwise, this tradition is confirmed by subsequent history and archaeology,11 which e.g. places the site of John’s tomb in Ephesus (cf. Plommer 1962:124).

Phoebus Apollo in the Ephesus region

Oracular centre of Apollo worship

The first century, all of the main centres of Apollo worship, except for Delphi, were concentrated around Ephesus, in what is now halfway western Turkey. Apollo and his twin sister Artemis were quite popular and their worship had old papers in this region. Ephesus prided itself in the great temple of Artemis, one of the wonders of the world (cf. Acts 19); nearby Clarus (Κλάρος) to the northwest had an important Apollo sanctuary, which also served as oracle. Nearby Didyma to the south was even more important. It boasted the second centre of Apollo worship in the Greek world after Delphi. But the office differed in that the prophetess was part of the Apostle’s considerations.

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10.Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica 4.14.6 also confirms John’s residence in Ephesus and his immersion in Greco-Roman culture, when he relates an anecdote from Polycarp about the apostle, who fled from the bathhouse because of the presence of a renowned heretic, Cerinthus: καὶ εἰσῆν οἱ ἀκροάσις αὐτοῦ ἵνα Ἰωάννης ὁ τοῦ κύριου μαθητὴς ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ παρεῖδη ἐμφανίσεις καὶ ἱερεὺς τὸ πέταλον πεφορεκὼς καὶ μάρτυς καὶ διδάσκαλος... ἔνδον ὄντος Κηρίνθου τοῦ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐχθροῦ... ἔνδον Κηρίνθου τοῦ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐχθροῦ... ἔνδον Κηρίνθου τοῦ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐχθροῦ... ἔνδον Κηρίνθου τοῦ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐχθροῦ...

9.Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica 3.13.8: Ἰωάννης ἐν τῆς Αλεξανδρείας πρωτοτέκτην ἔγραψεν τοῦ Ἰουστίνου τοῦ ἱερεῦ τῶν αἰώνων τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρῶτον ἱστορίαν (οὕτως δ’ οὖν τὴν μὲν τῆς σαρκὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρῶτα τῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πράξεων εἰκότως δ’ οὖν τὴν μὲν τῆς σαρκὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρῶτα τῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πράξεων εἰκότως δ’ οὖν τὴν μὲν τῆς σαρκὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρῶτα τῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πράξεων εἰκότως δ’ οὖν τὴν μὲν τῆς σαρκὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρῶτα τῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πράξεων εἰκότως δ’ οὖν τὴν μὲν τῆς σαρκὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρῶτα τῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πράξεων εἰκότως δ’ οὖν τὴν μὲν τῆς σαρκὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρῶτα τῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πράξεων εἰκότως δ’ οὖν τὴν μὲν τῆς σαρκὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρῶτα τῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ πράξεων εἰκότως δ’ οὖν τὴν μὲν τῇ...
Miletus effectively functioned as the harbour of Ephesus (cf. Acts 20:17–38, 2 Timothy 4:20), so that the commercial and cultural ties within this region are apparent. When St. Paul was active in Ephesus, this did not remain a local affair, but resulted in reaching the entire province of Asia as a result (see Ac 19:10, 20; 1 Cor 16:9).

Also, the two centres were religiously intertwined, as both Apollo and his sister Artemis were worshiped in both places. In Didyma excavations have revealed a temple of Artemis near to that of the more prominent Apollo temple. Interestingly, both sanctuaries in Didyma were built on the sites of ancient springs (Tuchtelt 1991:90). The very name of the town also conveys the idea of twinship (Apollo Διδύμος), which refers to these divine twins. Although a minor oracular sanctuary to Apollo in Ephesus only dates back to the 2nd century AD, the long established oracle at Claros was not far away, and neither was the Miletian one in the south. Herodotus indicates that the oracle in Didyma was used for consultation by the whole region, including the citizens of Ephesus (Historia 1.157–158):

The Cymaeans resolved to make the god at Branchidae their judge as to what course they should take; for there was an ancient place of divination there, which all the Ionians and Aeolians used to consult; the place is in the land of Miletus, above the harbour of Panormus. The men of Cyme, then, sent to Branchidae to inquire of the shrine what they should do in the matter of Pactyes that would be most pleasing to the gods; and the oracle replied that they must surrender Pactyes to the Persians. When this answer came back to them, they set about surrendering him. But while the greater part were in favour of doing this, Aristodicus son of Heracleides, a notable man among the citizens, stopped the men of Cyme from doing it; for he did not believe the oracle and thought that those who had inquired of the god spoke falsely.15

Cultural unity of Ephesus/Miletus/Didyma region

Ephesus and Didyma were quite close, not only geographically, but also culturally and historically. Didyma was politically part of Miletus (Μίλιτος), where inhabitants built the oracle.

Like Delphi’s, the Oracle in Didyma worked with a human agent, an inspired prophet or prophetess who opened himself to Apollo as the god of inspired prophecy (Chappell 2006:346). Herodotus (1.46), who usually refers to Didyma as ‘Branchidae in the Milesian country’ (ὁι δὲ τῆς Μῆλης ἐς Βραγχίδας), does not describe the practices in detail, probably because the oracle is not known to have issued major political advice. Surviving inscriptions are the main source for establishing the kind of consultations that were made at Didyma (cf. Morgan 1989:23–24).

Parallels between the Johannine Logos and Apollo Phoebus

Difference

Before one starts a comparison of deities in different religions, it is important to briefly consider the limitations of such an enterprise. Despite the parallelisms that will become obvious in this section there is sufficient discontinuity in religious context and definition to prevent endorsement of the thesis that the Logos was a Christian remake of a Greek deity. First and foremost, although Apollo is part of a pantheon of gods, the Johannine Logos functions in a monotheistic setting. Secondly, one of the important roles that John claims for him is that of the Creator of all things. This role is not claimed for the Logos as an entity. Despite the parallelisms that will become obvious in this section there is sufficient discontinuity in religious context and definition to prevent endorsement of the thesis that the Logos was a Christian remake of a Greek deity. First and foremost, although Apollo is part of a pantheon of gods, the Johannine Logos functions in a monotheistic setting. Secondly, one of the important roles that John claims for him is that of the Creator of all things. This role is not claimed for Apollo. He arrived on the scene much later. If anything, he stole the oracular site at Delphi from the earth goddess Gaia. In Greek mythology she was the personification of this planet.
and its fertility. Her marriage with Uranus (earth and space) produced the Titans, Cronus, and other divine and primordial beings. In other words, unlike the Logos, Apollo is far removed from the era of creation and has no claims on humanity as a creator. Thirdly, Apollo also does not need incarnation. He appears on earth with a body every now and then, but there is no permanently becoming part of humanity in the Johannine sense. Despite his notoriously unsuccessful love affairs, he always and exclusively continues to belong to the realm of the gods. The Johannine Logos is not a genitor; neither does the incarnation facilitate this. The Logos has no son in the carnal sense, unlike the Apollo of Greek mythology. The Jesus of the gospels is not interested in procreation, producing a family line. The Logos functions only in leaving a spiritual offspring, but even this, according to John, is essentially the province of the Spirit. He gives the sort of life that cannot be produced by the body (Jn 6:63).

**Apollo, light, and revelation**

This being said, there are parallels between Apollo and the Johannine Logos, which would have made several characteristics of the Logos sound familiar to 1st century Greek in the Ephesus region and elsewhere. As communication between God and humanity was a central idea in the prologue, it should be noted that Apollo was primarily worshipped as a god who responded to human enquiries. Almost, if not every, Apollo sanctuary was also an oracular site. This was for a reason, as he was known as the god of light and prophecy. All ancient Apollo sanctuaries – Delphi, Delos, or Didyma (all dating back to the 8th century BC), worshipped him as the god of light with prophetic insight that could be useful to those who consulted him.

To reflect this light connection, the Greeks gave him the epithet Φοίβος (Latin: Phoebus), bright, radiant, or pure. This title is associated with the prophetic oracle in Delphi. Plutarch (De E apud Delphi 388-389, cf. 393.C) says that the more prophetic revelation. Light in the sense of spiritual abilities, he was also referred to as Apollo Μαντικός (prophet). Although both light and revelation are prominent in Apollo worship, the two are connected in a different way than in the Johannine Logos with its clear connection between light and prophetic revelation. Light in the sense of spiritual illumination seems to be lacking in the religious imagery around Apollo. Although he radiates purity, this is not the general light with its disclosing properties that one finds with the Johannine Logos. Although Apollo has light too, this is more in the sense of ritual purification than revelation of the divine will. For John’s gospel, light and revelation go together, but with Apollo these are separate qualities, although they do belong to one another at a secondary level. Plutarch makes this clear when he compares Apollo’s prophecy with a deflected ray of light that is captured in the vehicle of poetry, as oracles were often delivered in verse (De Pythiae Oraculis 407E). So although not with the same intensity, still with a measure of the same symbolism, Phoebus Apollo is also the revealer. According to Euripides he carries this trait *par excellence*, because Apollo fears neither the gods, nor the people who come to make enquiries of him.

Euripides (Phoenissae 958, cf. Plutarch, De Pythiae Oraculis 407D):

> The man who practices the prophet’s art is a fool; for if he happens to give an adverse answer, he makes himself disliked by those for whom he takes the omens; while if he pities and deceives those who are consulting him, he wrongs the gods. Phoebus should have been man’s only prophet, for he fears no one. 14

Phoebus and prophecy go together. Aeschylus makes that clear by the memorable words of Orestes (Ὀρέστης) in his *Eumenides* 740: ‘O Phoebus Apollo! How will the trial be decided?’ (Ὀ Φοίβ’ Ἀπόλλων, πῶς ἄγην κριθήσεται?) This same connection between Phoebus and divine pronouncements comes through in the opening verses of the tale that describe Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece (Argonnius Rhodus, *Argonautica* 1.1):

> Beginning with thee, O Phoebus, I will recount the famous deeds of men of old, who, at the behest of King Pelias, down through the mouth of Pontus and between the Cyanean rocks, sped well-bench Argo in quest of the Golden Fleece. Such was the oracle that Pelias heard, that a hateful doom awaited him to be slain at the prompting of the man whom he should see coming forth from the people with but one sandal. 15

So, despite the difference in scope and intensity with the Johannine Logos, revelation and the symbolism of light are present with Apollo. There is a level of parallelism that would have been apparent to Greek people in the Ephesus region. They were familiar with the idea of a god who reveals divine will and is referred to as the god of light at the same time.

**Life, healing, and well-being**

Apollo was also the Greek god that was known for his healing powers. This was not an activity separate from his oracular
role. His mantic abilities operate jointly with his healing powers. From Homeric times, Apollo was considered a god who could strike with disease, but also cause the pestilence to leave (Homer, Iliad 1.60–75):

But come, let us ask some seer or priest, or some reader of dreams—for a dream too is from Zeus—who might say why Phoebus Apollo is so angry, whether he finds fault with a vow or a hecatomb; in hope that he may accept the savour of lambs and a hecatomb; in hope that he may accept the savour of lambs and he may set us free from the pestilence that he has brought us.16

The combination of oracular and healing components is particularly visible in the Ephesus region, as Didyma was both an oracular and healing site. Significantly, Strabo in his Geography (c. 64BC – 24 AD) points out that Apollo was especially worshipped and consulted for his healing powers.17

Apollo and his twin sister were approached for bodily well-being, to keep calamity and disease at bay. There are profound parallels with the healing qualities of the Johannine Logos. Jesus pronounces a healing oracle to the official’s son (John 4:50), heals a long-term cripple at Bethesda (5:8–9), gives sight to a man born blind (John 9:1–7), and famously raises Lazarus from the dead (11:38–44). Jesus’ comparison of himself with the copper snake that was lifted in the desert to bring healing to the Israelites (John 3:14) would have been readily understood in this cultural context and to some extent familiar in its concepts and imagery to the Greeks of the Ephesus region. Since times immemorial (cf. Homer) Apollo had been associated with a snake, and his son Asclepius had the symbol of a single snake wrapped around a pole, not unlike the Mosaic serpent on a pole. He also inherited Apollo’s qualities of healing powers, plus protection against sickness and disease (cf. Apollonius Rhodius, Argonautica 2.500). It is perhaps no coincidence that the only reference in the New Testament to the Mosaic snake on a pole is found in John’s gospel.

So also at the level of life and healing there are several parallels between Apollo and the Johannine Logos. Phoebus Apollo reveals and heals.18

Conclusion

A philological analysis of John 1:1–18’s textual context emphasises the revelatory emphasis of the fourth gospel. The Logos as the divine Creator denotes his special relationship to this world and humanity. Divine communication takes place in a setting that is discontinuous with the first creation, the Logos becomes incarnate in a world that is in rebellion against God, a place of darkness, devoid of Divine revelation where his own receive him not. It is God’s speech, the fruit of his breath or spirit, that created in the beginning and recreates in John’s gospel. As revealing light the Logos also provides insight for humanity. In this way the Logos comprises the Old Testament notion on light, revelation, life, and healing, with particular parallels in Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Wisdom, and Jesus Sirach. Light, life, and revelation function at equal semantic levels, whereas the communication strategies of the Logos are facilitated by the work of Father and Spirit. Because of its theological continuity this parallelism between the prologue and biblical wisdom literature may be regarded as derivative. The parallelism between the prologue and the Greek oracle religion, on the other hand, is functional. Although there is theological discontinuity, John uses the familiarity of his hearers with revelatory concepts to proclaim his biblical message in a Greco-Roman setting. The prologue’s concept of a God of light who reveals (communicates) and heals connects in a very basic way with the Greek notion of Phoebus Apollo and the Ephesus region, where a revelatory message of light, life, and healing was long since associated with the gods. Both the derivative parallelism with the Septuagint and the functional parallelism with the Apollo worship contribute to the unique revelatory emphasis of John’s gospel.

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Competing interests

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16 Homer, Iliad 1.60–75. Ὑπὸ γὰρ τῶν μάντων κόρακος ἢ θάνατος ἢ καὶ ἱεροπόλοι, καὶ γὰρ τὸ ὄνομα εἰς ἄλλας ἡμέρας, ὡς εἴπο τῷ τόπῳ ἀρχαῖος Φεόβης Αἴτουλλας, εἰ μὲν ἄρ᾽ ἐν τῇ θυγατρίᾳ ἀκούσαντα ὅθεν ἐκοινώνησα, εἰ κεί τοις ἀρχαῖοι ὁ λόγος ἀρχαῖοι τε τελείων βούλεται ἀντιάσας ἡμῖν ἀπὸ λοιγὸν ἀμῦναι

17 Strabo, Geography, 14.1.6: Ὕλου δ᾽ Απόλλωνα καλοῦσί τινα καὶ Μιλήσιοι καὶ Δήλοι, ὁρῶν θυγατρὶ, καὶ παιωνικὸν τὸ γὰρ ὄνομα οὕγωνεν ἀνείκενε τὸν τό καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τοῖς ἀρχαῖοι καὶ μένειν τοις ἄρχαιοις, ἢ ἀλλ᾽ ἀρχαίοις, ἢ τοῖς τοῦτοις ἀνάπτουσι τοῖς τοίς ἀρχαῖοις ἡμῖν ἐκοινώνησα, ἢ τοῖς τοῖς τοῖς τοῖς τοῦτοις ἀρχαῖοις καὶ μένειν τοῖς ἀρχαῖοις, ἢ τοῖς τοῖς τοῖς τοῖς τοῦτοις ἀρχαῖοις καὶ μένειν τοῖς ἀρχαῖοις

18 From the 2nd century it became apparent that the oracles were in such decline that they even pronounced the end of pagan religion, or were at least attributed to do so. Beatrice (1997:5) defines these as ‘special oracular utterances, mainly by Apollo and Hekate about the nature of the gothhead, which became common in the pagan world from the end of the 2nd century CE to satisfy the increasing demand for religious certainties’. See Pier Franco Beatrice (1997:5–22). These oracles of Apollo initially functioned in the defence of paganism against Christianity (cf. Augustine, De Civitate Dei, ch.17–19).


