

ΛΟΓΙΟΝ IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract

This article explores the use of λόγιον in literature (Septuagint and New Testament) and shows how this agrees with its classical use as authoritative message from the gods. Building on an overview of the function of λόγιον in its several textual contexts, it defines and distinguishes this use of λόγιον against the background of λόγος. This culminates into a summary of the use of λόγιον in literature, which argues for the following five characteristics: λόγιον is exclusive to divine speech (1); exclusively addressed to the human world (2); both specifically and collectively used (3); applied in an intimate setting of covenant relationship (4); and its contents is revelatory in nature (5). From the plural use of λόγιον in Acts, Romans, Hebrews and 1 Peter, this article advocates practical applications for the future of Biblical scholarship in the 21st century. This specific use of λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ emphasizes that the Bible comes to us in a profound spiritual context and with a specific spiritual claim, namely as Words from Above. This encourages an innovative appreciation of the primary sources of Apostolic Christianity and calls for a renewed quest to do justice to their prima facie meaning.

1. Introduction

Words and artefacts may both be vehicles of divine reality, instruments to call people closer to God. Lately the popular media have shown a great deal of interest in the latter. For instance, many books and documentaries are published about the possible fate of the Ark of the Covenant. The Coptic Church, the British Israelites, the Crusaders and the people of Zimbabwe are among the candidates who supposedly took and hid this holy object that used to play such an important role in the temple worship of the Jews. On its lid, the mercy seat, the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the covenant and reconcile the Jewish people to their God. Somewhere in history, however, the Ark disappeared. 2 Maccabees 2:1-8 casts some interesting light on this:

[1] *One finds in the records that Jeremiah the prophet ordered those who were being deported to take some of the fire, as has been told,*

[2] *and that the prophet after giving them the law instructed those who*

were being deported not to forget the commandments of the Lord, nor to be led astray in their thoughts upon seeing the gold and silver statues and their adornment.

[3] *And with other similar words he exhorted them that the law should not depart from their hearts.*

[4] *It was also in the writing that the prophet, having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God.*

[5] *And Jeremiah came and found a cave, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense, and he sealed up the entrance.*

[6] *Some of those who followed him came up to mark the way, but could not find it.*

[7] *When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: "The place shall be unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy.*

[8] *And then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated."*

In this passage verse 4 connects this theme of word and artefact. Jeremiah receives a divine command to hide the Ark, the tent and the small altar in a mountain cave;¹ Just as Joseph would receive a divine warning to take the child Jesus and his mother and leave for Egypt (Luke 2:13). The objects disappear, have to be protected, but the word remains as the prophet encourages the people to keep the law of God in their hearts. Apparently the relationship with God can be maintained without objects of worship, but not without his Word. Divine speech is the primary way through which God relates to his chosen people. Words should receive much greater recognition as communicative intermediaries and more lasting carriers of the divine.

This truth is reinforced by the use of the word *λόγιον* in Biblical literature. In classical Greek authoritative communication from the realm of the gods is conveyed by *λόγιον*, the divine reply on enquiries at an oracular site. Only the gods can speak *λόγιον* (cf. Liddell & Scott 1996:1056). This same specific word for divine revelation is found in literature as well. This article will explore the use of *λόγιον* in the Septuagint and the New Testament. Does its application agree with its classical counterpart as authoritative message from the gods? And if so, could specific applications for

Christian academic endeavours in a post-modern world be derived? Building on an overview of the function of λόγιον in its several textual contexts (2), it defines and distinguishes this use of λόγιον against the background of λόγος. Both the results from the Septuagint (3) and the New Testament occurrences (4) are presented. This culminates into a summary of the use of λόγιον in literature.

2. What is in a word?

One of the most evident ways that the writers of Biblical literature claimed to receive divine speech is their use of the word λόγιον. This word is a physical illustration that Jesus' statement about adding or removing a jota² may be of some consequence to philologists as well as to a more general public. While the commonly used λόγος is primarily word, a communicative vehicle of any sort, this is not true about λόγιον. Like λόγος it is a word, but it is much more restricted in its meaning. The ancient Greek used it to describe an oracle (cf. Liddell & Scott 1996:1056), i.e. an authoritative pronouncement of the gods. In other words, while the author of λόγος could be human or divine, λόγιον was always produced in the heavenlies.

3. The Septuagint

An overview of the use of λόγιον shows that the Septuagint follows this classical approach by treating it as an authoritative pronouncement of God. While a detailed discussion of these passages in the LXX may be found elsewhere,³ a summary of main results below suffices to show a remarkable consistency with the classical use of λόγιον.

In the book of Numbers, Oracles equal knowledge from the Most High and seeing visions of God revealed in the sleep. The concept Oracle embraces both knowledge and revelation of this knowledge from the realms of the Divine, as this knowledge is not accessible ordinarily, without act of revelation on God's part. In Deuteronomy Oracles equal God's Covenant with the people of Israel and the laws this Covenant involved.

This same thought is reflected in the Psalms, where Oracle is used as the equivalent of God's commandments for human life. It is also a summary term for God's authoritative revelation, coming from heaven to earth. Oracles equal the stainless Law of the Lord, his faithful testimony and his

righteous judgements. These Oracles are regarded as pure and fully reliable. Man can take these Oracles in his mouth, but never is their source. God's Oracle establishes mercy and truth from God's heaven upon earth with man. Just as obedience to God's Oracles brings blessing, disobedience brings troubles, distress and affliction. Acting foolishly equals not keeping God's Oracles. On the other hand, God's Oracles equal great gain to those who appreciate these. It is noteworthy that the use of *λόγιον* in Psalms suggests the availability of Scripture containing these Oracles of God.⁴

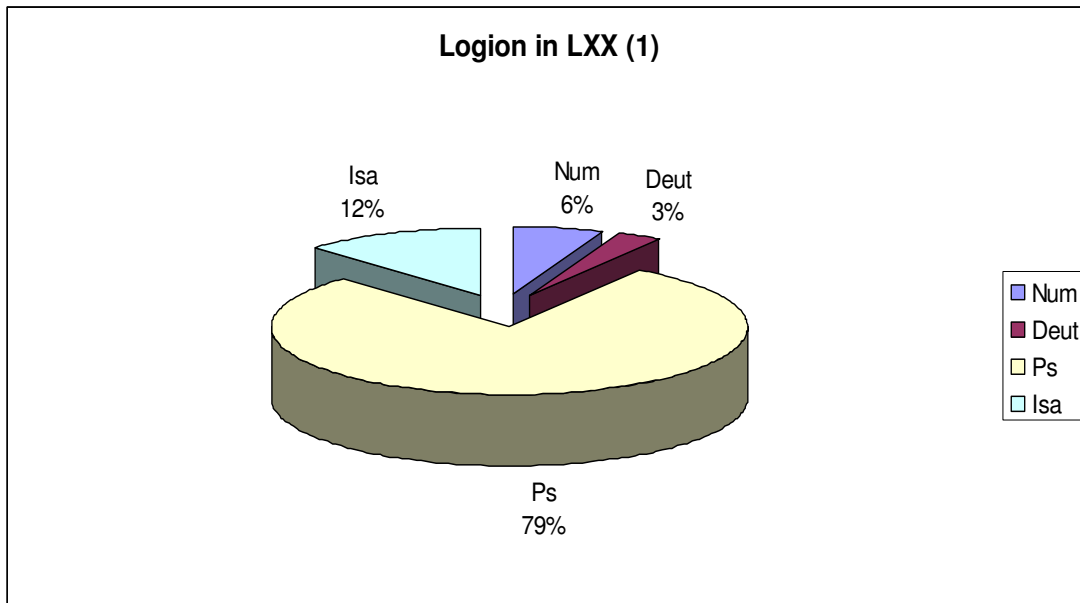
In Isaiah God's Oracle equals both the Law of the Lord of Hosts, as well as a specific prophecy of judgement. In this same book we find that the Oracle of God's lips may equal an Oracle of anger. Its author and accomplisher is God. Its contents are his wrath and vengeance on the sins of the nations.⁵

This general overview indicates that the Septuagint attaches a similar, exclusively divine connotation to *λόγιον* as the classical and later Greeks did. In Biblical literature *λόγιον* has also a connotation of an intimate relationship. This is particularly suggested by the occurrences in the book of Psalms. There *λόγιον* is mostly used in a context of prayer and talk with God, a setting of intimate communication between God and man. It is in this context of personal fellowship that God's *λόγιον* functions. Man receives and applies it to revive hope and to keep on the path of righteousness; sometimes trusting that God will confirm his promises and that his commandments are the best way; other times confronting God with his Word and pressurising the Most High for fulfilment of the same.

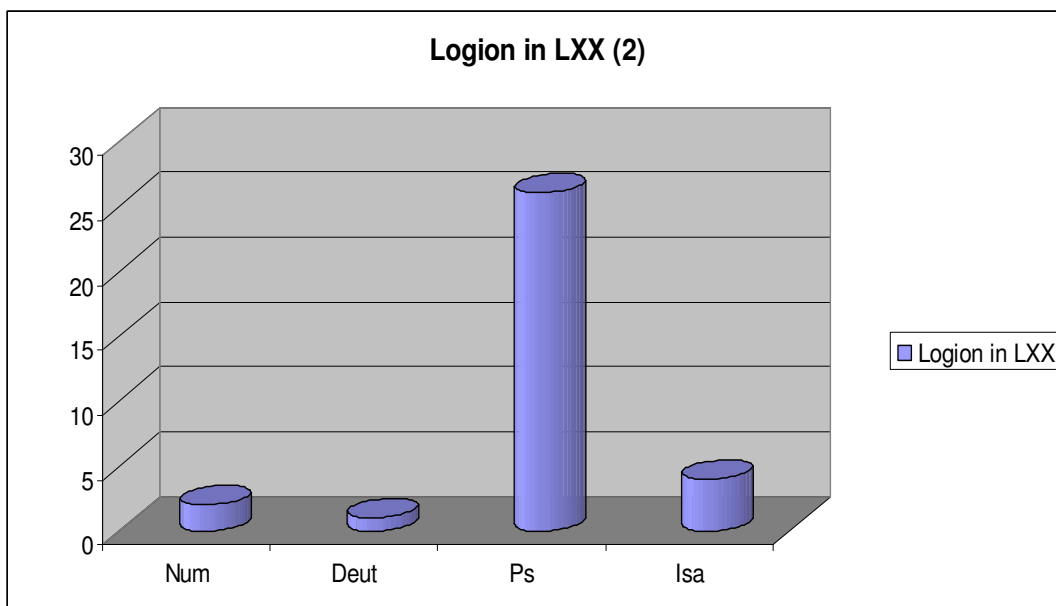
3.1 The use of *λόγιον* in graphics

The use of *λόγιον* in the Septuagint may be summarized by the following graphics.

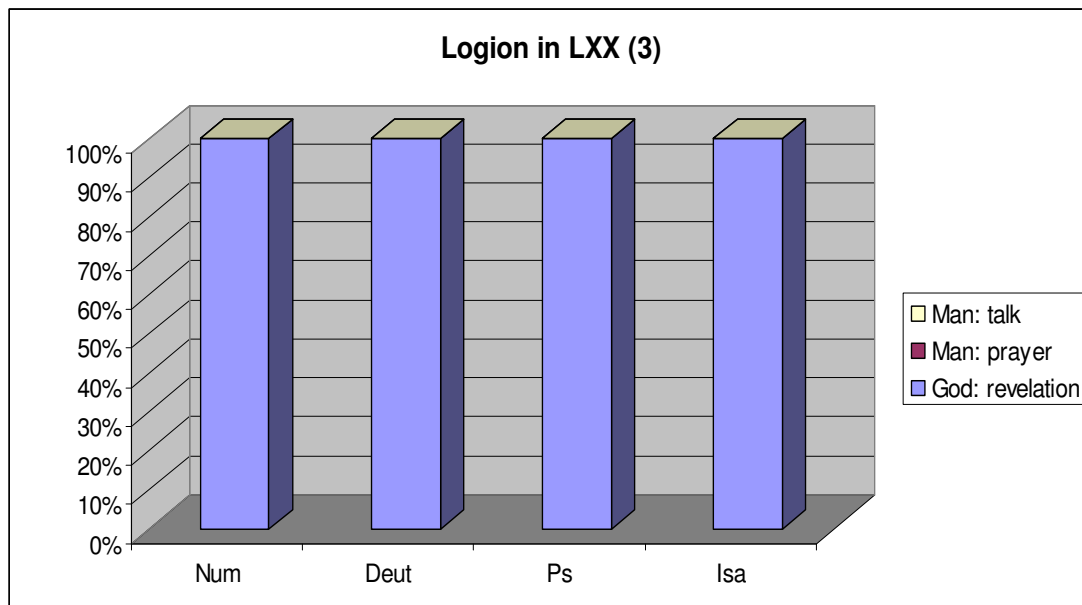
Graph 1 shows how the use of *λόγιον* is spread throughout the Greek Old Testament and which book claims what percentage.



Graph 2 shows the actual occurrences of λόγιον in the Septuagint.



Graph 3 deals with the character of each passage when subjected to an analysis. While other Greek words may be classified as talk to fellowmen, prayer to God or divine speech respective to their context, the situation with λόγιον is very different. As it meets these categories in the Septuagint the results are as follows.



Summarised, one may conclude that in the Septuagint:

- a) λόγιον exclusively describes God speaking to man;⁶
- b) λόγιον is used to describe specific instances of God speaking (audible voice, dream, vision, appearance);
- c) λόγιον also describes the phenomenon of Divine speech (refers to the fact of God speaking to man, or its record in memory or writing, which may be subsequently passed on and proclaimed to fellowmen).

4. Apostolic Christianity

Four books of the New Testament have passages that contain λόγιον. These are found in Acts 7:38, Romans 3:2, Hebrews 5:12 and 1 Peter 4:11.

4.1 Philological conclusion about λόγια ζῶντα in Acts 7:38

In Acts 7:38 λόγια ζῶντα is part of Stephen the Deacon's final sermon to the Jewish leaders (cf. Zuiddam 2008:125-133). He refers to λόγια ζῶντα as speech of the living God that was given to Moses for the people of Israel. The expression is used for specific communication by God and claims to be relevant, not only to Moses and the Israelites of old, but also for the life of Stephen's hearers and Luke's readers. The fact that these λόγια are presented as "living" shows their inherent sacred power that is

connected to their divine origin.⁷ The translation “oracles” (NRSV) correctly emphasizes that Moses received information claiming to be God speaking from the heavenly realms to make his will known on earth. The context of Acts 7 shows that these words were revealed by an act of God involving angels and not by theological speculation on Moses’ part. This reflects an attitude of the utmost reverence towards these λόγια ζῶντα in early Christianity as sacred utterances of God addressed to man’s life situation on earth. This presents a challenge to Christian scholarship in the 21st century. In Stephen’s mind Biblical studies should be aimed at maintaining and reinforcing a relationship with the living God who Luke presents to his readers. The λόγια ζῶντα are part of a communicative process between God and men, in which even the Biblical scholar himself becomes involved as he studies these. Even academic endeavours should make a spiritual difference. Mere theological theories will leave theology a dry pursuit, irrelevant to a post-modern world.

4.2 Philological conclusion about τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ in Romans 3:2

In the Epistle to the Romans the expression τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ (NRSV: the oracles of God)⁸ is found. The narrow textual context of Romans 3:2 (for a detailed exegesis of λόγια in this passage, cf. Zuiddam 2008:135-145) suggests that the author had divine words in mind that were specifically entrusted to the Jews as a people. Paul’s response to the rhetorical question about the privilege of the Jews is πολὺ κατὰ πάντα τρόπον (much, indeed in every way). When Paul defines this, he mentions only one thing, ὅτι ἐπιστεύθησαν τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ. This shows how much he values the fact that the Jews had been entrusted with the oracles of God. Jonker (1967:54) is completely right in saying: “As hy egter oor die *alle opsigte* moet uitbrei, noem hy slegs één ding: dat *die woorde van God* aan hulle toevertrou is.” The expression seems to have a rather broad application and is likely to include everything God spoke through Moses and the prophets. The Apostle presents this as a matter of the greatest privilege to his readers, both for its authoritative contents and the personal involvement of the God of the Covenant these represent. The author uses these “oracles” or “very words of God,” as a collective reference to all divine speech that was entrusted to the Jews before the revelation of God’s righteousness in Christ, to which these λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ bore witness in advance. It is easy to take this privilege of God entrusting us, like the Jews of old, with his Word for granted. This is not in the last place true for Biblical scholars and professional ministers who work every day with the sacred texts. The

expression λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ in Romans continues to remind that the availability and assistance of God's revelation is a precious responsibility, pleasantly weighing on the shoulders of any Christian scholar.

4.3 Philological conclusion about λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ in Hebrews 5:12

In the Epistle to the Hebrews (5:12), the words λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ are particularly used to denote authoritative Divine speech. Both the wider and narrower context of Heb 5:12 show that λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ present a textual environment of an intimate relationship with God that is initiated by God's grace (cf. Zuiddam 2008: 147-162). God's oracles are instrumental for maintaining this relationship and promoting spiritual growth and maturity. The narrow textual addition of τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς in Heb 5:12 portray the importance of a very elementary knowledge, or basic understanding of these oracles.⁹ Even the practice of these Oracle basics is considered potentially life-changing and spiritually empowering by the author of Hebrews. The use of λογίων as such implies a divine source and this is reinforced by τοῦ θεοῦ. Their source is the omniscient and powerful God who takes the initiative to relate to mankind, communicating and acting upon his Word. For Christian scholarship there is a very practical application in the fact that the apostle presents the words λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ as part of a message of spiritual growth. The latter belongs not merely to the devotional realm, and despite old Enlightenment sentiments, should not be separated from the pursuit of knowledge. What Hebrews encourages is a pursuit of the mind of God. In this way the field of Biblical Studies should have a mediating function, connecting people with God, by interpreting and doing full justice to the primary sources. Biblical Studies is eminently suitable and necessary to facilitate spiritual scholarly growth in a post-modern world.

4.4 Philological conclusion about λόγια θεοῦ in 1 Peter 4.11

Like Romans and Hebrews, 1 Peter also emphasizes the divine source of λόγιον.¹⁰ The words λόγια θεοῦ are used in a textual context which requires God's grace and truth to inspire all Christian behaviour (cf. Zuiddam 2008:163-175). The earnestness of the specific admonition that contains λόγια θεοῦ is reinforced by its eschatological setting. In this situation of extreme seriousness it is God's oracles that provide the standard for preaching and pastoral counsel in the Church and for Christian speech in

general. Peter's use of *λόγια θεοῦ* is indicative of his view that what Christians communicate should be in line with the revealed will and insights of God. These *λόγια* are the believers' tool in letting God take control of their speech. He who speaks for God should be dependent on the mind of God. This is conveyed by *λόγια* and reinforced by *θεοῦ*. Consequently, the *λόγια θεοῦ* are the equivalent of God's authoritative utterances that should model all human speech. These *λόγια θεοῦ* are collectively used and should be translated with a definite article in English: "the oracles of God". As God's servants were prompted to speak in times past, Christians similarly are to follow the promptings of God as the standard for their speech. God's grace, reaching out to mankind and personally applied in a relationship where God provides his gift to believers, is foundational for this concept and part of the narrow context of *λόγια θεοῦ*.

In the light of this, the field of Biblical Studies has an important role to play. Peter's use of *λόγιον* is basically a call back to the primary sources. The religious documents as they have been handed down through the century by the spiritual appreciation of countless generations deserve to be treated with integrity. Some Biblical scholars should even be prepared to brush up on their Greek and Hebrew in an effort to do justice to the ancient text and its conveyed meaning. Other approaches may be helpful and stimulating, but only at a secondary level. Without ability to read and interpret the texts at their primary level – that of words in an ancient language in a package of sacred writ-scholarship would miss the mark. When faithfully pursued, Biblical Studies should be the ultimate guard against the cultural preference of the moment becoming the ventriloquist for sacred texts.

4.5 New Testament conclusions about the use of *λόγιον*

A quick comparison shows that the New Testament passages agree with the Septuagint on the basics. God is the exclusive author of *λόγιον* and its receivers are always human. However, where the LXX knows both a specific and a general use of *λόγιον*, in the apostolic writings of the New Testament *λόγιον* is only used in the plural and exclusively refers to a comprehensive package of Divine revelation.

This revelation comes in a context of grace. Acts, Romans, Hebrews and 1

Peter unanimously apply the term in a narrow textual context of God as he reaches out to relate to mankind. It is λόγιον that gives humans necessary direction as they relate to God in a covenant relationship. The concept Oracle embraces both knowledge and revelation of this knowledge from the realms of the Divine. The term Oracle is used as the equivalent of God's commandments for human life. It is also a summary term for God's authoritative revelation, coming from heaven to earth, its origin reinforced by the involvement of angels. All occurrences in the New Testament claim a continued relevance and authority of λόγιον in the first century, no matter when λόγιον was first communicated. Similar to the LXX, the instigator of λόγιον in Apostolic Christianity is always God, even in the case of the semi-pagan prophet Balaam it is God who dictates when and what he will reveal. In the Apostolic writings of the New Testament, this divine initiative is put in the narrow textual context of God's grace, as he reaches out to humans despite their sinfulness and makes a new beginning of their relationship to God possible.

5 General conclusions about λόγιον in Biblical literature and its implications

From the results presented under 2-4 the following five main characteristics may be derived for the use of λόγιον in the writings of Apostolic Christianity: λόγιον is exclusive to divine speech (A); exclusively addressed to the human world (B); both specifically and collectively used (C); applied in an intimate setting of covenant relationship (D); and its contents is revelatory in nature (E).

It is mainly in its collective use (emphasized by the New Testament writers, cf. 4.1-4.5), but also in its particular function for a particular life-embracing covenant relationship (emphasized by the Septuagint, cf. 3), that λόγιον has a distinct function in Biblical literature.

For the field of Biblical Studies the use of λόγιον emphasizes that the Bible comes to us in a profound spiritual context and with a specific spiritual claim, as Words from Above. This encourages an innovative appreciation of the primary sources of Christianity and calls for a renewed quest to do justice to their *prima facie* meaning. Theological pursuit in the 21st century can no longer afford a strict separation of the devotional and theological without risking to be irrelevant, both to its own sources and

post-modern surroundings. The days of Apartheid are over.

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NOTES

¹ 2 Macc 4:4: ἦν δὲ ἐν τῇ γραφῇ ὡς τὴν σκηνὴν καὶ τὴν κιβωτὸν ἐκέ-

λευσεν ὁ προφήτης χρηματισμοῦ γεννηθέντος αὐτῷ συνακολουθεῖν ὡς δὲ ἐξῆλθεν εἰς τὸ ὄρος οὗ ὁ Μωυσῆς ἀναβάς ἐθεάσατο τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ κληρονομίαν.

² Matt 5:18: ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν ἕως ἂν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ ἰῶτα ἓν ἢ μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται.

³ A detailed discussion of the use of λόγιον in the Septuagint may be found in: Oracles of God, a comparative study of Apostolic Christianity and its Greco-Roman world (Zuiddam 2008:177-194).

⁴ Psalm 119:148 (LXX 118:148): προέφθασαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί μου πρὸς ὄρθρον τοῦ μελετᾶν τὰ λόγια σου. The necessity to open one's eyes or the act of looking forward to first daylight to be able to meditate suggests the availability of Scripture containing these Oracles of God.

⁵ In the Wisdom of Solomon, God uses judgments to call his Oracles into remembrance. These Oracles are not specific oracles of judgement, but his commandments, which included provisions of judgement in case of deviation. The context of this occurrence is one of proclamation, containing a statement that God judged the Israelites to remind them of his Oracles. Wis 16:11: εἰς γὰρ ὑπόμνησιν τῶν λογίων σου ἐνεκεντριζοντο καὶ ὀξέως διεσώζοντο ἵνα μὴ εἰς βαθεῖαν ἐμπεσόντες λήθην ἀπερίσπαστοι γένωνται τῆς σῆς εὐεργεσίας. (RSV: To remind them of thy oracles they were bitten, and then were quickly delivered, lest they should fall into deep forgetfulness and become unresponsive to thy kindness.) Here God uses judgments to call his Oracles into remembrance (ὑπόμνησιν). These Oracles are not specific oracles of judgement, but his commandments, which included provisions of judgement in case of deviation (cf. Deut 6:15: ὅτι θεὸς ζηλωτῆς κύριος ὁ θεός σου ἐν σοί μὴ ὀργισθεῖς θυμωθῆ κύριος ὁ θεός σου ἐν σοί καὶ ἐξολεθρεύσῃ σε ἀπὸ προσώπου τῆς γῆς).

⁶ The Septuagint always presents God as the author of λόγιον. Although at first sight Ps 18:4 seems to be an exception to this rule as it speaks about τὰ λόγια τοῦ στόματός μου, a closer examination of its context suggests that the human mouth is portrayed as the vehicle of the proclamation of the words of God, whose message the Psalmist desires to declare.

⁷ In Stephen's mind these λόγια have the potential to change the life of himself and his hearers for the better. Jervell (1998:240,241) even states that the λόγια are alive and able to grant life: "‘Lebendige Worte’ heisst Worte, die Leben schenken." Krodel (1986:147) agrees and points out that this life has its origin in God himself: "The law consists of living, that is, of life-

giving, words which have their origin in God (cf. Heb. 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23). They demand obedience and faith toward the one true God and prohibit idolatry.” Some prefer to read “words of life,” referring to the positive consequences of obedience. Weiser (1981:185): “Auf den Empfang der Lebensweisungen am Sinai.” Stählin (1975:109), however, prefers “words of life”: “vielmehr mit der Bezeichnung ‘Worte des Leben’.” The Latin translation may have encouraged this. Pirot (1949:119) similarly translates the Latin “qui accepit verba vitae dare nobis” as: “qui reçut des paroles de vie pour vous les transmettre.” In English “words of life” is not an accurate translation of the Greek. The participial use of ζῶντα, an action word and not a noun (cf. ζῶης, e.g. 1 John 1:1 περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς), suggests that an inherent force of life is intended, either because God uses them to make men alive or to put them on the way to life.

⁸ This interpretation is confirmed and reflected by the following translations: De Boor (1962:85): “Ihnen wurden die Gottessprüche anvertraut.” Zeller (1985:76): “die Gottessprüche.” Schmithals (1988:105): “Die Worte der göttlichen Offenbarung.” Viard (1975:88): “Les oracles de Dieu leur ont été confiés.” Pirot (1948:51): “furent confiés les oracles de Dieu.” Fitzmyer (1993:324): “entrusted with the oracles of God.” Ziesler (1989:96): “the oracles of God.”

⁹ Hebrews defines these oracle basics as τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ. Zerwick & Grosvenor (1988:663) give the excellent translation “the elementary principles of God’s oracles”. Koester (2005:301) proposes something similar: “the most elementary matters of the oracles of God.” As Divine words these are authoritative in their own right. These “oracles” refer to all God’s speech in a general way. Van Oyen (1967:84): “De eerste beginselen van de uitspraken Gods.” Laubach (1967:111): “allerersten Grundlagen des Wortes Gottes.” Fensham (1981:49): “Grondwaarhede van die woorde van God.”

¹⁰ Goppelt (1978:287) points out that τὸ λόγιον conveyed an inherent divine origin: “der ‘Spruch’, der ‘Ausspruch’, ist schon im außerbiblischen Griechisch vor allem der von der Gottheit ausgehende Spruch, nahezu das Orakel. In der LXX ist τὸ λόγιον τοῦ θεοῦ weithin gleichbedeutend mit ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ, der biblischen Wortoffenbarung.” Selwyn (1947:219) agrees: “As in classical and Hellenistic Greek it means any divine utterances, such as oracles (cf. Thuc.ii.8, Aristoph. Eq.122), so here: the speaker in the congregation should reckon himself to be charged not with his own opinions but the utterances of God.” Schreiner (2003:215) shows this divine origin of λόγιον within the context of the LXX and the New Testament: “The ‘oracles of God’ refer to the words God has given his people (cf. Acts 7:38; Rom 3:2; Heb 5:12). The phrase is rooted in the Old Testament, where

we have both “oracles of God”(LXX Num 24:4,16; Ps 106:11 and “oracles of the LORD, “*logia Kyriou*, LXX Pss 11:7; 17:31) and “your oracles” (LXX Pss 118:11,103, 148, 158; 162; cf. *Wis* 16:11). Using speaking gifts to minister to others means that the one speaking endeavors to speak God’s words.”