

THE CONCEPT OF LOGOS

IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

The term Logos is one of the most important and most complicated terms of Greek thought. Initially it meant “reckoning”, “measurement” and “value”. In time it acquired many other meanings. Due to the human faculty of thought (innate logos) that makes reckoning and measurement possible, the word came to be understood as “thought” and “reason”; due to the verbal formulation of thought (uttered logos), it was understood as “word” and “speech”; it was also understood as the impression of the uttered logos (written logos). It was mainly Aristotle (4th century BCE) who dealt with these definitions and their analysis.

However, the term had already been introduced in philosophy by Heraclitus about a century earlier. Heraclitus used the word logos to imply

- human thought and speech and
- a universal logical order that permeates the relations between beings.

He also proposed that there is a relevance between the two meanings. Thus, for Heraclitus logos is primarily the harmony deriving from the antitheses existing in the universe; but it is also the reflection of this harmony in the human mind and takes the form of reason.

The Stoics, active since the 3rd century BCE, used the word logos with both its anthropological and its cosmological Heraclitean sense, but in a more developed way. For the Stoics, the universal Logos was an intelligent ethereal substance which acts on passive matter and thus creates and rules the universe; it was also called “Fate”. The individual human souls or logoi, the reasoning faculties of humans, are but parts of it. They contain all the principles

of the universal Logos on a smaller scale or in a seminal state (seminal logos). It follows that, according to the Stoics, the natural and true way of life is a life according to reason.

Middle Platonism is a name given to a stage in the development of Platonic philosophy, lasting from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE. The characteristic of Middle Platonism is the absorption of many elements from the Aristotelian, Stoic and Neo-Pythagorean schools of thought for the interpretation of Plato. Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 125 – c. 68 BCE), the founder of Middle Platonism, was the first to identify the Platonic Demiurge of Timaeus to the Stoic Logos. This identification was later followed by other Middle Platonists, such as the influential Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE – c. 50 CE).

Philo was also the first thinker who used philosophical allegory in order to interpret the Hebrew Scripture and harmonize it with Greek philosophy. Allegory had been a very common philosophical means of interpretation of the Greek myths for centuries, whereas Rabbinic Judaism used only literal interpretations of the Bible at the time. Philo noticed that in some books of the Scripture, such as the Psalms, the Proverbs, the Laments and Isaiah, the word of God is described, rather poetically, as a being separate or semi-separate from God himself. As he was more fluent in Greek than Hebrew, he knew the Bible from the Greek Septuagint translation, where the Hebrew word for “word”, *dabar*, was translated as logos; and this word was already very meaningful in Greek thought.

Philo affirmed the abstract and transcendent God of Middle Platonism, existing beyond time and space and for whom no appropriate predicates can be conceived. As completely transcendent, God created the world through mediators. Thus, the Word (Logos) of God, as the Platonic First Being, the Demiurge or Creator, becomes the chief mediator, the Second God, the adequate image of God, the Heavenly Adam and the prototype of the earthly man. It is also the Mind of God, his firstborn son and his envoy to the world. Philo identifies it with the Platonic Intelligible World. He also identified the Platonic Ideas with the Creator's thoughts. These thoughts make the contents of Logos; they were the paradigms for the making of sensual things during the creation of the world.

About twenty years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, some early Christians were already convinced about his pre-existence and semi-divine nature. Paul, in his epistles, was trying to convey those ideas to the Hellenistic Jewish communities. In order to achieve that, he tried to identify Jesus with other semi-divine figures already known from the philosophy of Philo. These first steps towards the deification of Jesus were somewhat hesitant and clumsy. Paul seemed not to be quite sure of the nature of Jesus, so he sometimes identified him with Logos, but without using this specific word; at other times he identifies Jesus with Sophia, the Wisdom of God, which was a different semi-divine agent.

It was fifty years later than Paul when the Gospel of John identified Jesus with Logos explicitly, an idea that became prevalent in Christian thought ever since. Yet, the exact position of Logos in relation to God remained quite speculative. Among other issues, it was disputed whether God and Logos were of the same essence, something that led to the controversies of the 3rd and 4th centuries and the eventual condemnation of Arianism in the 1st Ecumenical Council in 325 CE.

Except from his influence on Christian thought, the writings of Philo had also great impact on later Middle Platonic philosophers, such as Plutarch (c. 45 – 120 CE) and Numenius of Apamea (c. 150 – c. 210 CE). Plutarch also accepted a transcendent God, whom he named, in a Platonic fashion, "the Good". From the Good emerges Logos, who strives to control irrational matter. Plutarch, like Philo before him, understands the Logos as the sum-total of thoughts in the mind of God, the Intelligible World. He also makes use of allegory, not of the Hebrew Scriptures, but of Egyptian mythology. Thus, the Logos is Osiris, whose body is torn apart by Set, and his body parts are the Ideas dispersed throughout the material realm.

Although the writings of Numenius are only extant in a fragmentary form, we know that he called the supreme God Nous, the Intellect. From this supreme God emerged a Second God, a Demiurge who is called Logos and is responsible for translating the things of the intellectual realm to the realm of matter. Human souls were described as the fragments of Logos, each one a microcosm of both the intellectual and the physical realm. We also know that Numenius, like Philo, interpreted the Bible allegorically. The *Hermetica*, a 2nd century collection of texts attributed to the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, are sometimes considered expositions of the philosophy of Numenius. *Poimandres* uses the same nomenclature and is dependent on both the Platonic *Timaeus* and the book of Genesis.

Another movement dependent on both Middle Platonism and the Bible, almost contemporary to the *Hermetica*, is Gnosticism. In fact, Gnosticism is a collective name for a variety of religious systems, which cannot be adequately described in the confines of a short article such as this. So, only the Valentinians, one of the most important Gnostic sects, will be briefly discussed here. It is to be noted though that the other Gnostic teachers had at least similar ideas.

Valentinus (c. 100 – c. 145 CE) taught that the supreme God, the Father, emanated a series of spiritual beings or principles, the Aeons, who can be roughly identified with the Platonic Ideas. Those Aeons comprise the totality of the spiritual world. However, Valentinus uses a very different terminology than the Middle Platonists. Thus, Logos is for him the name of a sole Aeon, with no special function compared to the others. For the totality of the spiritual world he uses the term Pleroma, Fullness. He then proceeds, like all Gnostic teachers, to differentiate the spiritual world from the Demiurge, whom he regards as evil. Thus, although Gnosticism shares common roots with many philosophical ideas of the time, its ideological distance classifies it as a totally separate phenomenon.

Neoplatonism is the last stage in the development of Platonic philosophy. Plotinus (c. 205 – 270 CE), its founder, was deeply influenced by Philo, Plutarch and Numenius. Like the previ-

ous authors, he maintained that from the One emerged the First Being, the Demiurge or the Intelligible World, whose contents are the Platonic Ideas. However, Plotinus and his successors preferred to call this principle Nous instead of Logos. He may have chosen to do so in order to distance himself from the Bible and adhere to another 2nd century Platonic sacred text, the Chaldean Oracles, which used this terminology. For Plotinus, logos is not a separate being or essence; it is rather a term implying an analogy or a reflection. Thus, the logos of the One is indeed the Nous; but also the logos of the Nous is the rational Soul and so on.

It seems that with the emergence of Neoplatonism the term logos stopped evolving. Thinkers from this point onwards use the word in one of the aforementioned senses. And as modern esotericism often uses the word Logos without sufficient explanation, I believe that this brief historical survey will prove helpful.

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