The universal significance of the Logos in the Bible

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f all the concepts of Christian theology, expressing univer-salism, that of the Logos is second only to the God of creation (Genesis 1:1).

The fourth evangelist begins his gospel narrative with The great hymn to the universe (Marcus Borg), opening with the words: "In the beginning was the Word," that is revealed in his incarnation in Jesus. For this all-comprehensive universalism, John makes use of the term Logos, that has its roots both in the Jewish thought as well as the Greek philosophy.

Dabar in the Old Testament

In the bible, the link between Jesus Christ and the universal connectedness and relationship is the incarnation of the divine word (dabar). The Old Testament makes use of two words as intermediary between God and creation: wisdom (hokma) and word (dabar). "The worlds were made by the word of God" (Psalm 33:6). However, the word wisdom is made use of more frequently in the context of this creation.

Recent biblical studies have given new insights into the centrality of wisdom in the biblical tradition. Biblical scholarship has shown the importance of the figure of personified wisdom, particularly in the books of Job, Proverbs, Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon.

Wisdom is always closely associated with God's work of creation. Wisdom is connected with the whole of creation; it is present with God at creation as a skilled co-worker (Proverbs 8:30; Wisdom 7:22; 8:6). It pervades and penetrates all things (Wisdom 7:24), renews all things (Wisdom 7:27). Wisdom "reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other and orders all things well" (Wisdom 8:1).

Wisdom is at most times presented in the image of a woman, lady Wisdom, whose primary mode is relational (Job 28; Proverbs 1:8-9; Sirach 1:9-10; 4:11-19; Wisdom 6:11-12). Her connections extend to every part of reality. No aspect of reality is closed off from her. She exists as it were in a tapestry of connected threads, patterned into an intricate whole of which she is the centre.

In the book of Job, the figure of personified wisdom occupies a central role. Chapter 28 is a hymn to Wisdom, with the theme "where shall wisdom be found" (28:12-20). Similarly, in the first nine chapters of Proverbs we find a series of poems in which Lady Wisdom looms large (1:20-33; 3:13-24; 4:5-9; 8:1-9:5).

God begot or created Wisdom as the first born (8:22). In the book of Sirach, Wisdom proclaims that she has come forth from God, born from God's mouth as the word of God.

She speaks of her role in creation, of her exploration of the universe and of her sway over all nations. She comes to the earth like mist, as the breath of God covers the waters (24:3-7). God has placed her in every human being as the eye (olam (Sirach 17:8).

The book of Wisdom describes Wisdom as God's power and as an emanation of the glory of God (7:25), living with God (8:3) and associated with all God's works (8:4). Roland Murphy summarises
Wisdom as “a divine communication: God’s communication, extension of self, to human beings. And that is no small insight the biblical literatures bequeath to us.”

**Logos in Greek philosophy**

Heraclitus (c. 535-475 BCE), was the first to make use of the concept of the Logos in Greek Philosophy. For Heraclitus, *logos* was the principle that ensured continuity in a world that was in the process of constant flux.

It is the ground, word, speech, account, reason. Heraclitus used it as a technical term, as the principle of order and perception. Already here we see how the *logos* was a principle of relation, the principle that related the two moments of the reality in flux: the present and the past as well as the present and the future.

When we come to the Platonic world, we are told that the platonic ideas were located in the *logos* that acted in the physical world, on behalf of God. Justin the martyr who spoke of the *logos* *spermatikoi* (seeds of the Word) has said that Plato, in fact, lifted the idea of the *logos* from the Thoral.5

The Stoic philosophers identified *logos* with the all-pervading divine animating principle of the universe. It is the divine principle implicit in the cosmos giving its order and meaning. Similar related ideas we come across in Indian, Egyptian and Persian Philosophical systems. The Indian scriptures, the Vedas, are believed to be the articulations of the Sages’ experience of the eternally resounding *Vak*, the divine revelation.

**Jesus the Logos**

However, it is in Christian thought that we have the full flowering of the principle of *logos*, adopted to explain the mystery of the Christ-event, integrating the Old Testament and Greek philosophy.

The Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (ca 20 BCE to CE 50), adopted the Greek term *logos* into Jewish philosophy describing it as the intermediary between God and the cosmos, as the agent of creation and as the agent through which humans understood God.

No doubt, Philo was influenced by the *hokma/dabar* in the Old Testament. Philo identifies *kosmos noetos*, world thought with the Logos, “God’s first born, who holds the eldership among the angels ... the Beginning, the Name of God (*o noma theou*), the Word (*Logos*).”

The evangelist John, writing towards the end of first century CE, continuing the early Church’s search to understand deeper the person of Jesus Christ, takes the then prevailing cultural term *logos* and presents Jesus as the incarnation of the eternal *logos* that existed from the beginning, i.e. the beginningless beginning, in contrast to the Old Testament description of the *hokma/dabar* that was God’s first creation.

John tells us how the *logos* was God and with the God, showing the universal connectedness and relationship of Jesus as the incarnation of the biblical *hokma/dabar*.

The ancient Christian hymns such as Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20, and Hebrews 1:3-4, identify Jesus with the biblical Wisdom. These hymns could have been sung well before the writing of the books in which they figure.

Hence we could conclude that the identification of Jesus with divine wisdom could have occurred in the early post-Easter community. St. Paul speaks of Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). He is the pre-existent wisdom present from before all ages and in creation.

As Tom Wright has emphasised, John’s gospel is so firmly rooted in the Genesis account of creation. Not only does the prologue so evocatively recall Genesis 1.1, but also chapter 20 which highlights the “first day of the week,” in other words, the starting-point of a new creation in which the old is taken up and transformed, not least by the echo of Genesis 2 as Jesus breathes into the disciples his own commissioning Spirit.6

Scripture scholar, Edward D Miller, has pointed out how in John 1:1-5 we have four strophes, each making an assertion about Logos’ relation to something, and in each strophe to something different.

Thus the first strophe is about Logos in his personal relation to God, the second is about his creative relation to the world, strophe three expresses the Logos in his incarnate relation to humans, and strophe four turns our attention to the Logos’ victorious relation to evil.

Through the prologue, John makes history a theological category due to the salvific presence of the word. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the empirical historical reality so permeated by the divine as we do in John due to the presence of the Logos.

Incarnation is in relation to and in continuity with the other three states of God’s saving activity in Logos. The pre-creation, creation, incarnation and the
present glorious state are the four stages of the activity of the Logos.

The prologue introduces Jesus in such a way that "the reader knows from the outset that he embodies, incarnates, the Jewish figure of wisdom, and thereby upstages the logos-speculations of other contemporary philosophies. 7

The opening verses of the Johannine prologue, verses 1–4, presents us with an amazing and all-embracing universality, openness without boundary, hospitality without reservation, dialogue without discrimination, acceptance without conditions.

Due to this all-pervading activity of the Logos graphically narrated in the prologue, St. Augustine in his City of God approvingly quotes a Platonic philosopher who is reported to have said that the first five verses of the prologue must be written in gold and displayed in the most prominent place in every church (X, 29).

The prologue of John uses the language of the logos rather than that of the hokma/Sophia—wisdom. Yet what is said in terms of logos is very much dependent on what is said of wisdom in the Old Testament.

Raymond Brown is of the opinion that John substituted Sophia with logos because the latter is masculine while the former is feminine. 8

In the prologue, as well as in the early Christological hymns, we find a theological connection between God’s action in creation and Jesus Christ. Everything in creation bears the mark of the Word, the divine reaching out to the world.

God had God’s salvific plan close to God from the beginning. All history and every single thing that happened took place through the mediation of the Logos.

The world is the realm of the revealing Word. The Word that became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth is already with God in whom the entire divine mystery of salvation is already hidden. The whole creation stands bathed in the light of salvation through the Word.

There is a theological flow in the Johannine presentation of the Logos from his pre-existence to creation, accompanying it by bestowing it life and light, to the incarnation of the same in Jesus of Nazareth with his ministry, until he is raised to the glory that he had from all eternity (John 17:5).

The Word was from the beginning, en arche, outside the limits of space and time, neither of which existed then. The use of the past imperfect en, indicates how God’s Word was not an after-thought, but was from the beginning.

That is to say, the illumination, the revealing of the light-giving work of the Word did not start just with Christianity or any other religion, but it is coeternal with God. It is the common patrimony of all religions. No wonder, most world religions have a theology of the Word expressed in different ways.

The Word pre-exists the story of humankind, though in relationship with the God (pros ton theon). Here John makes a distinction between the Absolute Mystery of God (the apara Braman, in terms of Indian Philosophy) and the Word, logos, (the Vak).

The Word is spoken from the intimacy of God, it is revelatory. The main function of the Incarnate Word too is revelatory (John 12:45 & 14:6). The history of humanity can be woven through from the pre-existence of the Word, to the life and light brought to every human person by the same Word through creation, and the Word that becomes Flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

What is specific to the Christian community is the Incarnation with the ministry, where the Incarnate Word invites all “to come and see” (John 1:39), to follow him and thus reveal God who is with us, Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23).

Logos is God’s presence and self expression. God communicates God’s self through God’s Word. The traditionally prevalent way to understand the incarnation is in the context of sin.

This is only one school. Here Jesus Christ is seen as the unique Saviour. The alternative is to see incarnation flowing from God’s free love expressed through God’s Word through creation and Incarnation, as a continuous process.

Incarnation is not dependent on a fall, it was part of God’s plan, the free self-communication of divine love. The world is God’s world that God created through God’s Word and God’s saving action is not a rescuing from this world, rather to renew creation, by getting rid of evil. 9

The interesting fact is that according to the Hellenistic mind there could not be a greater contradiction than associating the logos with sarx (flesh). Yet, that precisely is what John does in the prologue: o logos sarx egeneto (the Word became flesh), making that affirmation the most influential New Testament affirmation in the history of Christian teachings.

Sarx points to what is most ordinary in human
beings, their frailty. John’s affirmation underlines the sharpness of the antitheses and the depth of the synthesis of logos and sarx. God’s Word has entered completely into our human existence.

**Incarnation and the mission of the Church**

In the light of what we have seen it is obvious that Christian theology cannot subscribe without qualification to the various anthropological theories regarding the origin or explanation of religions, including the many primal religions.

Anthropologists tend to describe religious practices, especially those of the primal religions in terms of pre-animalism, animism, magic, totemism and other things.

The biblical realism goes beyond them and affirms that any genuine religious expression is the result of the illumining activity of the Word through whom God created the universe.

That Word is the source of their religious relationship with God, even when there have been tendencies of deviation and corruption in the form of witchcraft, sorcery, divination, idolatry and others. This is the basis of the Christian call to interreligious dialogue.

The logos that was from the beginning with God, becomes flesh, as a succession of events in history. The key point is his relationship with God. As W Ross Blackburn has shown, the beginning of mission is divine self-manifestation. Commenting on the book of Exodus, Ross Black Burns writes: “[T]he Lord’s missionary commitment to make himself known to the nations is the central theological concern of Exodus.”

The same is true of the incarnation of the logos as well.

Incarnation is the visible and concrete presentation of the Word who is operative in the world from the beginning enabling us to “see and touch his glory.” The whole ministry of Jesus was the manifestation of the true divine nature in human form. In Jesus we encounter the divine in the fullest form as far as humans are concerned.

The picture that emerges from the earthly ministry of Jesus in the gospels is that he was intensely conscious of God as his intimate abba and that he was anointed and sent to inaugurate the divine reign.

His food is to do the will of the Father (John 4:34), to remain in the Father as the branch and the vine (John 15:1-8 & 17:20-23). He can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father is doing (5:19).

The term Father, the only absolute, occurs 120 times in John in contrast to the 84 times in the Synoptics.

All this effects a perfect transparency between the Father and the Word so that the Word can manifest the Father.

He is the hokma, divine wisdom, the divine plan for creation. God is revealed in the concreteness of this person. In him we have the experience of God in history. God’s attributes are to be experienced not a priori, but in human history through the Word made flesh.

“We have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; felt it with our own hands and of this we tell, about the word of life” (1John 1:1).

Jesus, the Word incarnate, is a reader of the signs of the times. The Jewish society and the religion of the times stood in need of a transformation from legalism and ritualism as well as priestly careerism. Jesus begins his mission with his experience of the divine grip on him through the anointing of the divine Spirit at the time of his baptism by John in the Jordan.

His miracles were not so much to prove his divinity, as much to show how God is already at work to transform the society. They were the signs of the setting in of the divine rule in and through him.

In the process of the doctrinal developments that came in the course of Greek inculcation the Church lost sight of this biblical realism. For the Hellenistic mind, Christ (Messiah) was only a proper name.

For the Greeks, a messiah who came to manifest the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and others operating in history was not as important as the understanding of the person, substance and nature of Jesus Christ.

The historical Jesus with his ministry of "the deeds of light" (John 3:18-21), becomes peripheral. What was important was the correct academic expression of faith, in line with Greek philosophy that was accustomed to a God of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Plotinus and others for whom God was the unmoved mover, uninvolved in the material world. However, the focus of the prologue is the advent of the pre-existent logos into the world at a certain moment of time and the rest of the gospel is the narration of the activity of the Incarnate logos.

**Mission as transformation of the world**

The world is God’s world that God created through God’s Word and God’s saving action is not a rescuing from this world, rather to renew creation, by getting rid of evil.

The community of his disciples is not a people escaped from the world, but a spirit filled and suffering agent of a new creation, with a commission
to go into the world with the message of a new creation.\textsuperscript{11}

We need to return to the biblical understanding of Jesus Christ that the fourth evangelist has spelt out providing absolute universalism and openness, while realising the significance of the Incarnation, to manifest God in the concrete (John 12: 45 and 14:9) through his ministry.

While John 1:1-5 describes the work of the pre-existent logos, John 1:14 onwards is the narration of the work of the Incarnate Logos.

The synoptic gospels in particular describe this ministry in terms of the divine reign which John presents as the deeds of light, passing from the deeds of evil. In both ways it is a process of historical transformation of the world while preserving the openness to the religions and cultures of the world.

The parable nature of Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection, is the revelation of God’s compassionate love. World history is a love story, a narrative of God’s love for the world, always permeated by God’s creative and enlightening Word.

No one is outside of this story, this narrative. In this narrative there are different points or milestones of events and persons: creation, exodus, covenant, Incarnation, Zorashter, Buddha, Socrates, Mohammed and many others, all of whom and which are integral to the logos.

In the fullness of time the logos pitches his tent among humans by becoming flesh disclosing how humans are to approach God and neighbour within the spectre of relationality.

The community of his disciples is the visible sacrament of this love story, to concretise what happened in incarnation, always aware that the mystery of the logos is Universal. That mystery belongs to all religions and they all belong to that mystery.

In Christian terminology, in the words of Jac Dupuis, “the divine Word is the universal agent of all historical divine self-manifestation, even before his incarnation in Jesus Christ that his historical incarnation transpires in view of its meta historical and universal operative presence as the resurrected Lord.”\textsuperscript{12}

The universality of this mystery cannot be localised exclusively in a point of time in history. This, in turn, impels the Church to get rid of any exclusive claims, and to be committed to the mission of love and service.

As Anthony Kelly and Francis Moloney have shown, the Word becoming flesh entered into the world of human meaning in a four-fold way: cognitive, i.e. the Word enters human experience as an objective datum demanding an assent to the reality of the revealing God; constitutive, i.e. affecting the experience of human identity, forming our identity in the light of divine meaning; communicative, i.e. giving the shared possession of the deeply meaningful, and fourthly effective, i.e. enabling Christians to transform the world in new ways.

The experience of the Word becoming flesh inspires Christians to a world-shaping praxis.\textsuperscript{13} This praxis can be described as: Word-inspired to inspire the world, the mission of the Church.

END NOTES

1. Scripture scholars have pointed out how the divine qualities of Word (Logos), Wisdom (Sophia) were adopted by the Septuagint Jews, i.e., the Jews of Greek influence in Alexandria to bridge the gap between the utterly transcendent God and creation, occurring not in the earlier Hebrew bible, but in the Sapiential books of later origin, no doubt influenced by the Greek notion of the Logos. See Bovon Francois, The Emergence of Christianity, (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck), 2013, p27. This has influenced the Christian Trinitarian theology as well.


3. JUSTIN, The Martyr, First Apology 53-60


5. WRIGHT, Tom, Creation, Power and Truth—the gospel in a world of cultural confusion, (London: SPCK,2013), p21


7. WRIGHT, Tom, p23


9. WRIGHT, Tom, p23


11. WRIGHT, Tom, p24
