THE JEWISH ROOTS OF DIVINE CHRISTOLOGY: THE DIVINE WORD BEFORE JESUS

Gonzalo de la Morena

Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Roma

Abstract: The Jewish traditions about the Word of God play a central role in the development of early Christology. By examining Philo of Alexandria's Logos and the Targumim's Memra, this article aims to illustrate the interplay between continuity and discontinuity of New Testament Divine Christology within its Jewish context. Within a frame of overarching continuity, the Incarnation introduces a genuine novelty, reshaping established notions about the Word. The radical nature of this novelty demands a historical explanation. Further studies could explore the correlation between historical events and the development of these ideas.

Keywords: Logos, Incarnation, Divinity of Christ, Christology, Word of God.

Riassunto: Le tradizioni giudaiche sulla Parola di Dio hanno un'influenza significativa sullo sviluppo iniziale della Cristologia. La nozione di Logos in Filone di Alessandria e quella del Memra nei Targumim aramaici offrono preziose prospettive per illustrare il rapporto di continuità e discontinuità tra la fede neotestamentaria nella divinità di Cristo e il suo contesto giudaico. L'Incarnazione, entro un quadro di continuità, rappresenta una novità che ridefinisce le concezioni esistenti sul Verbo divino; tale innovazione richiede una spiegazione storica. Ulteriori studi potrebbero esplorare l'interazione fra gli eventi storici e lo sviluppo di queste idee.

Parole chiave: Logos, Incarnazione, Divinità di Cristo, Cristologia, Parola di Dio.

I. INTRODUCTION[1]

How could a first-century Jew worship a crucified man? Israel worships the only God YHWH, whose transcendence is such that it doesn't allow any representation, whether pictorial or verbal: His face cannot be seen, His name cannot be pronounced. And yet, in the first century, a group of people, worshipped the crucified and risen Christ alongside the God of Israel. This religious practice is manifested, among other places,[2] in the passage of Philippians 2,10-11: «at the name of Jesus

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[1] Lecture delivered at the Notre Dame University Systematic Theology Colloquium on January 26, 2024. This presentation provides a concise preview of our ongoing research on the origins of faith in the divinity of Jesus, which remains unpublished. The title, intended for a wider audience, requires two clarifications. Firstly, "Divine Christology" is employed to articulate the faith assertion that Jesus is not solely the promised Messiah but also possesses a divine condition. From a Catholic perspective, "Divine" may seem redundant alongside "Christology"; but here it expresses a reduction of our focus to one particular aspect of the whole Christological discourse. We use the term "Divine Christology" to specify the limitation of our study to the divine condition attributed to Christ, and not as opposed to alternative non-orthodox Christologies. Secondly, the phrase "before Jesus" does not strictly denote *chronological* precedence but rather aims to contrast Christian faith with its Jewish origins, discerning what is genuinely innovative in Christianity vis-à-vis its Jewish roots. While acknowledging that our selected sources, Philo and the Targumim, do not predate Jesus chronologically –at least most of the Targumim–, they represent Jewish perspectives *independent of Christianity* (more details about this aspect will be provided in footnote 8). Hence, they can be studied as manifestations of Jewish conceptions on the divine word that do not depend on Christian theology, and in this sense, "before Jesus".

[2] For further exploration about the early Christian devotion to Christ and its Jewish context, cfr. M. HENGEL, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene 2007; IDEM, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, XPress Reprints, London 1983; L.W. HURTADO, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1998; IDEM, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion*, Eerdmans, Cambridge 2000; IDEM, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, Eerdmans, Cambridge 2003; IDEM, *How on Earth did Jesus become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus*, Eerdmans, Cambridge 2005; A.T.E. LOKE, *The Origin of Divine Christology*, Cambridge University Press, New York

every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father».[3] This paradox constitutes the central theme of our broader investigation, yet to be published, a historical-theological exploration focusing on the origins of belief in the divinity of Jesus.

In this paper, we will address one particular aspect of this inquiry: the Jewish theology of the Divine Word, as one of the roots of Divine Christology. Arguably, one of the most significant antecedents to early Christology is the Jewish theology of the Divine Word, which is integrated in the New Testament concerning the figure of Christ. We question whether this Christology represents a theological evolution of its Jewish origins or if, in some sense, it signifies a rupture with them.

To explore this question within these limited pages, we presuppose a foundational understanding of the intricate theology of the Word in the Hebrew Bible, a subject extensively addressed elsewhere. Rather than reiterating this exploration, our focus turns towards two sources that reflect Jewish interpretations of the Bible –or more broadly, Jewish thought– roughly contemporaneous with the composition of the New Testament. We consider Philo of Alexandria, a prominent figure in Hellenistic Judaism, and the Targumim, focusing solely on their treatment of the concept of "word of God". Although these sources do not precede the life of Jesus chronologically, they provide valuable insights into pre-Christian Judaism, being recognized as Jewish texts independent of Christian influence. Our analysis of these sources will be facilitated by the consultation of secondary literature authored by contemporary scholars. In examining early Christology, our attention shifts to the New Testament, particularly the writings of Paul and John.

Our exposition is structured into three sections. First, we provide a concise overview of the main views about the connection between Ancient Judaism and early Divine Christology. Second, we explore the Jewish notion of "The Word of God", through the lenses of Philo of Alexandria and the Targumim. Finally, we examine the continuity and discontinuity of New Testament Christology with these traditions.

2017; S. Infantino, *La venerazione di Gesù nel protocristianesimo. Indagine sulla cristologia dalle origini gerosolimitane all'età sub-apostolica*, Città Nuova, Roma 2017.

[3] Biblical texts are sourced from the *English Standard Version*, Crossway, Wheaton 2016.

II. Perspectives on the Jewish Roots of the Divinity of Jesus

The emergence of faith in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth presents a compelling question, both from theological and historical points of view. A central aspect of this inquiry is the connection between the earliest Divine Christology and its Jewish background. Two opposite viewpoints aim to explain this relationship: one emphasizing a significant break and the other highlighting complete continuity.

The first perspective, more prevalent in the past,[4] emphasizes discontinuity. The belief in the divinity of a man appeared simply incompatible with the Jewish mindset. For instance, the French theologian Jean Guitton, reflecting on the infinite transcendence and strict oneness of the Jewish God, wrote in 1964 «a god in human form was doubly

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[4] According to scholars such as Giuseppe Segalla, John P. Meier or N.T. Wright, the reappraisal of Jesus and his movement's Jewish identity constitutes a prominent feature of the so-called Third Quest for the Historical Jesus. Contemporary scholarship on the historical Jesus delineates the progression of research into several phases, culminating in the current Third Quest. A significant shift from the Second to the Third Quests involves moving from emphasizing discontinuity to recognizing continuity between the early Christian movement and its Jewish origins. This transition was facilitated by the discovery and renewed interest in Jewish non-canonical documents dating to the first century. Cfr. for instance, G. Segalla, *Sulle tracce di Gesù: la 'Terza ricerca'*, Cittadella, Assisi 2006; J.P. Meier, *The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain*, «Biblica» 80 (1995) 459-487; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress, Minneapolis 1992, 21 ff. According to these scholars, authors like J. Jeremias or G. Bornkamm, considered part of the Second Quest, tended to portray First-Century Judaism as the negative background overcame by the advent of Christianity. Meier says: «perhaps the single greatest justification of the third quest is its attempt to undo the caricatures of Judaism perpetrated consciously or unconsciously by the first two quests» (Meier, *The Present State of the Third Quest*, 466-467). However, we refrain from adopting their terminology –first, second and third quest– due to its contentious nature, as critiqued by F. Bermejo, *Historiografía, exégesis e ideología. La ficción contemporánea de las 'tres búsquedas' del Jesús histórico (I)*, «Revista catalana de teología» 30 (2005) 349-406 and its sequel *Historiografía, exégesis e ideología. La ficción contemporánea de las 'tres búsquedas' del Jesús histórico (y II)*, «Revista catalana de teología» 31 (2006) 53-114, a view challenged by R. Aguirre, *La 'Third Quest', ¿una nueva investigación?*, «Revista catalana de teología» 33 (2008) 301-325. Aguirre, while accepting that the tripartite periodization is a simplification, highlights some valid aspects of it, such as the Jewish contextualization of Jesus and his movement as a defining characteristic of contemporary research compared to investigations conducted decades ago.

unthinkable, inconceivable». He further remarked: «while the addition or subtraction of one more god in the Roman pantheon might not surprise anyone, from the perspective of Jewish tradition, this represented an unimaginable novelty».[5] Consequently, from this point of view, faith in the Divinity of Christ is portrayed as a striking rupture with Judaism.

Conversely, contemporary historiography stresses the continuity between early Christianity and its Jewish roots.[6] Some historians, examining certain beliefs in Second Temple Judaism, even dispute or downplay any substantial innovation in early Christology within its Jewish milieu. According to their perspective, the presence of some mediating figures suggests that there was room for a second divinity in the Jewish heaven.[7]

Our broader yet unpublished research studies the concrete Jewish beliefs that may align with New Testament Christology. Specifically, if concentrates on figures mediating between God and His creatures, categorizing them into two groups: "bottom-up" mediation figures and "top-down" mediations figures. In the first group we considered those creatures that, at certain junctures, are elevated by God to a higher status, enabling them to undertake divine missions or even partake in divine prerogatives, like some Angels in apocalyptic angelology, some apocalyptic traditions about the Son of Man, as well as certain high

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[5] J. GUITTON, *Gesù*, Marietti, Bologna 1964, 223, 225.

[6] Some examples of this emphasis can be found in G. BOCCACCINI, P. STEFANI, *Dallo stesso grembo: le origini del cristianesimo e del giudaismo rabbinico*, EDB, Bologna 2012; D.L. BOCK, J.H. CHARLESWORTH (eds.), *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, T&T Clark, London 2013; R.A. BÜHNER, *Messianic High Christology: New Testament Variants of Second Temple Judaism*, Baylor University Press, Waco 2021; D.D. HANNAH, *Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1999, as well as in the works quoted in the next footnote.

[7] This section offers a broad overview of the spectrum of positions regarding the relationship between Judaism and the origins of faith in the divinity of Christ, delineating two contrasting viewpoints. The inherent limitations of a "Nota" preclude the comprehensive elaboration of the motives or specific arguments underlying these authors' stances. Further elaboration will be offered in forthcoming publications. About the position that tends to downplay any novelty in portraying a second person or power in the Jewish God, cfr. B.D. EHRMAN, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*, HarperOne, New York 2014, 54, 61, 252, and *passim*; P. SCHÄFER, *Two Gods in Heaven. Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 2020; A.F. SEGAL, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, Brill, Leiden 1977.

messianic expectations. The latter category includes several powers or attributes of God Himself that are personified and describe God's action or presence in the world. This group contains the Spirit of the LORD, Wisdom, the name of God, and various traditions concerning the Word of God, among others.

This unpublished and more comprehensive research investigates the relationship —whether one of continuity or rupture— between each of these figures and the Divine Christology depicted in the New Testament. I will now center my attention on what, in my perspective, is one of the most significative figures: the Jewish traditions about the Word of God, particularly in Philo of Alexandria's Logos and the Aramaic Targumim's Memra of God.

III. The Jewish Divine Word

In this context, we presuppose a foundational understanding of the rich theology concerning the Word of God in the Hebrew Bible, and we focus our attention toward two sources that may bear witness to a potentially divine Word within Judaism of the first centuries: Philo of Alexandria and the Memra of the Targumim. While some of these documents postdate the emergence of Christianity, they remain independent from it, thereby serving as compelling testimonies of a Jewish non-Christian or conceptually pre-Christian conception of a Divine Word.[8] These documents not only receive but also extend the Biblical traditions about the Word.

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[8] Regarding the independence of Philo's Logos in relation to the Christian Logos, see G. Reale, *Introduzione. L'importanza, il significato e la struttura della filosofia di Filone di Alessandria*, in Filone di Alessandria, *La creazione del mondo e le allegorie delle leggi*, Rusconi, Milano 1978, 5-56; G. Reale, R. Radice, *Monografia introduttiva*, in Filone di Alessandria, *Tutti i trattati del commento allegorico alla Bibbia*, Rusconi, Milano 1994, VII-CLV; R. Williamson, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Volume 1, part 2: Philo*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1989. Concerning the independence of the Targumim's Memra from the Christian Logos, cfr. D. Muñoz León, *Dios-Palabra. Memra en los Targumim del Pentateuco*, Institución San Jerónimo, Granada 1974, 581. Numerous scholars employ these sources similarly to our approach, regarding them as testimonies to a Jewish concept of the Word of God conceptually preceding Christianity. Notable among them are: Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*; Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven. Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity*; M. McNamara, *Logos of the Fourth Gospel and Memra of the Palestinian Targum (Ex 12)*, «The Expository Times» 79 (1968) 115-117; D. Boyarin, *The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John*, «Harvard Theological Review» 94 (2001/3) 243-284.

1. Philo's Logos

The Greek term for "word", λόγος, propitiates a convergence between the Jewish and the Greek intellectual contexts, as manifested in the Alexandrian Jew Philo. In his allegorical commentaries to the Bible, Philo integrates Middle-Platonic and Stoic's conceptions of the Logos with the figure of the Word of God of the Jewish Scriptures.[9] For us, the critical question revolves around whether Philo's Logos is just an expression of God himself or is a distinct mediator. Philo's texts do not offer a straightforward answer.[10]

In some texts, Philo's Logos can be perceived as a part, power or act of God, meaning *mind of God*, *God's expressed thought* or *God's thinking activity*.[11] Thus, it will not really represent an entity apart from God. For example, in *De Opificio Mundi*, Philo likens the process of creation to constructing a city or edifice, where the architect's plan exists in his mind before materialization. Similarly, in the act of creation, God first conceives the intelligible world in his mind, which contains the ideas as archetypes for the sensible world. The intelligible world subsists in the Logos, which is therefore God's mind or God's thinking activity, as the place of the ideas.[12] So, here, the Logos is God, or at least the Logos is in God.

At first glance, the Logos may appear synonymous with the intellect of God, and therefore it would not constitute a second entity, apart from

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[9] Cfr. M.-Y. SAGNA, *Concetto di logos e sintesi culturale nel pensiero di Filone d'Alessandria*, Pontificia Università Salesiana, Roma 2020, 61. WILLIAMSON, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo*, 104.

[10] For the ideas in the subsequent exposition, cfr. G. REALE, *Introduzione*.

[11] Cfr. WILLIAMSON, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo*, 108, 110, 111. He also uses the term "divine Potencies" referred to the Logos, cfr. 111.

[12] *De Opificio Mundi*, VI, 24-25: «If any one were to desire to use more undisguised terms, he would not call the world, which is perceptible only to the intellect, anything else but the reason [logos] of God, already occupied in the creation of the world; for neither is a city, while only perceptible to the intellect, anything else but the reason of the architect, who is already designing to build one perceptible to the external senses, on the model of that which is so only to the intellect [...] It is manifest also, that the archetypal seal, which we call that world which is perceptible only to the intellect, must itself be the archetypal model, the idea of ideas, the reason [logos] of God», Yonge's translation, available online in P. KIRBY, *Early Jewish Writings*, 2024: earlyjewishwritings.com (accessed 4 may 2024).

God Himself. It is God's thought. However, it is not so simple. Some other texts do distinguish the Logos from God. For instance, in this passage from *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, the Logos is conceived as a link between Creator and created:

> To his Logos, his chief messenger, senior in rank, the Father who created all things has given as a pre-eminent gift the privilege of standing on the frontier of being to separate what has been created from the Creator. The same Word is a continual suppliant to the immortal God on behalf of mortal man, who is exposed to affliction, and is also the ambassador of the ruler to the subject race. The Word rejoices in this gift and exulting in it describes it in these words, «I stood between the Lord and you» [Dt 5:5], that is, being neither uncreated like God, nor yet created like you, but midway between the two extremes, a pledge to both sides.[13]

Philo states that the Logos was destined by the Father who created the universe, so that it may be "in the middle" (μεθόριος) to separate (διακρίνῃ) what is created from the Creator. Its mediating function works, at the same time, as bond (δεσμός)[14] and as divider (τομέυς).[15] According to scholar Díaz-Lisboa, this paradoxical double function is key to the mediating role of the Logos: on the one hand, the Logos protects the transcendence of God over Creation and preserves it from contact with matter; on the other hand, it allows God to reflect His bounty on Creation.[16] According to Williamson, «it has been suggested that, by the time Philo wrote, the problem of reconciling the transcendence and the immanence of God had become acute within Judaism»;[17] Philo himself developed a strong doctrine about God's transcendence, which «required him to develop the idea of mediation by the Logos between God and his creation; otherwise there would have been no kind of communication or relationship».[18]

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[13] *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, 205-206. We use the translation by WILLIAMSON, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo*, 119.

[14] *De fuga et inventione*, 112.

[15] *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, 130-143, cfr. M.A. DÍAZ-LISBOA, *El Logos mediador en Filón de Alejandría*, «Palabra y Razón» (2021) 43.

[16] DÍAZ-LISBOA, *El Logos mediador en Filón de Alejandría*, 49.

[17] WILLIAMSON, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo*, 105.

[18] *Ibidem*, 120.

In addition to that, Philo attributes titles such as the *firstborn son of God*,[19] the *image of God*,[20] or even *the second God*[21] to the Logos.[22] The Logos can receive many names, as Philo asserts: «the eldest of his angels, as the great archangel of many names; for he is called the Authority, and the name of God, and the Logos, and man according to God's image, and he who sees Israel».[23] Philo likens the Logos with the manna, the High Priest, the Angel of the Lord or even with God's Wisdom.[24] He, therefore, merges different biblical figures of mediation and refers all of them to a single entity, the Logos.[25] So, in these texts, Philo's Logos emerges as the ultimate mediating figure between God and the world, akin to the Biblical Wisdom, as a distinct entity with a certain ambiguity regarding its proper divinity.[26]

Different perspectives could exist regarding the Logos' nature and its relationship with the divine. Some texts of Philo's could be read as asserting the Logos' divinity, interpreting it as an expression of God's presence, power or action in the world while maintaining God's transcendence and separation from it. Certain scholars, such as James Dunn, interpret all of Philo's references to the Logos in this way. According to Dunn's perspective, Philo employed discourse about the Logos merely as a means to articulate the divine, but never considered it as an ontologically independent entity distinct from God.[27]

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[19] *De Agricultura*, 51. The Logos is called «firstborn of God» in *De Confusione Linguarum*, 146, and in some versions of *Legum Allegorie* III, 175, as reported in G. Reale (ed.), *La creazione del mondo e le allegorie delle leggi*, Rusconi, Milano 1978, 304, «primogenito».

[20] *De Fuga et Inventione*, 101.

[21] *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin*, II, 62.

[22] Cfr. Reale, *Introduzione*, 44.

[23] *De Confusione Linguarum*, 146.

[24] Cfr. Reale, *Introduzione*, 44.

[25] It is also merged with the personified Wisdom. According to Reale and Radice, in many Philo's texts, it is permissible to equate the figures of Logos and Wisdom, considering the latter as the biblical transposition of the former, Reale, Radice, *Monografia introduttiva*, 96-97.

[26] Cfr. Díaz-Lisboa, *El Logos mediador en Filón de Alejandría*, 47-49.

[27] Cfr. J.D.G. Dunn, *Per i primi cristiani Gesù era Dio?*, Claudiana, Torino 2019, 95-96.

However, other scholars argue that, at least in certain texts, Philo affirms the ontological independence of the Logos with respect to its Creator, which configures it as a real creature and not just a mere projection.[28] Notably, scholars like Giovanni Reale and Roberto Radice remark that, in Philo, the Logos is a highly polysemic term.[29] They have presented a scheme with four different ways in which Philo talks about the Logos: the Logos in God, the Logos in itself, the Logos in the world and the Logos in relationship with men.

According to Boyarin: «Philo oscillates on the point of the ambiguity between separate existence of the Logos, God's Son, and its total incorporation within the godhead polysemy or ambiguity appertains to Philo's texts themselves».[30] So, attempts to reduce this notion to a single, univocal meaning —whether created or divine, whether autonomous or a power of God— appear challenging to undertake without forcing an interpretation or leaving aside certain texts.[31] Of our particular interest, among the various facets of Philo's Logos, is its ambiguity regarding its ontological status: its autonomy or distinction from God, as well as its personal character and true divinity, remain neither clearly nor explicitly defined by the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher.

Following the insights of Larry Hurtado, we can delve further into the divinity of Philo's Logos, examining not only its ontological status in speculative theology, but also its hypothetical manifestation in cultic practice. If the Logos were truly considered a second divine entity, we would anticipate the emergence of a worship directed towards it as a god or with God. However, the Logos does not elicit specific worship. It is not invoked in prayer nor adored or praised; it is not an object of faith or love.[32] There is no evidence of any Jewish liturgical worship to the Logos, nor to any second figure together with God in Hellenistic Juda-

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[28] This is the position of different authors like M. Todorovska, *The Concepts of the Logos in Philo of Alexandria*, «Živa Antika» 65 (2015) 37-56; Reale, Radice, *Monografia introduttiva*, 7-94; Williamson, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo*, 119-143.

[29] Cfr. Reale, Radice, *Monografia introduttiva*, 89.

[30] D. Boyarin, *The Gospel of the Memra*, 251.

[31] This polysemy is affirmed not only by Boyarin but also by the cited authors like Todorovska, Reale, Radice and Williamson.

[32] Cfr. Díaz-Lisboa, *El Logos mediador en Filón de Alejandría*, 47-48.

ism.[33] This reinforces the core tenet of Jewish monotheism that prohibits worship directed to any figure other than the God of Israel. So, while in the theory the ontological status of the Logos remains unclear, in the religious practice there is no room for a second divinity.

2. *The Targumim's Memra*

If these ideas about the Jewish Divine Word were confined solely to Philo, one might be inclined to perceive them as an exception influenced by Hellenistic thought. However, scholars such as Daniel Boyarin have shown that similar ideas go beyond Philo. In fact, shifting our focus from Hellenistic Judaism to Aramaic Judaism reveals echoes of a parallel notion about the word of God. Specifically, evidence emerges in the Targumim.

Since these are Aramaic interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures, we should not expect to find explicit elucidations of their concept of word of God. Nevertheless, this underlying notion is discernible in a distinct phenomenon: the notable frequency with which the Targumim replace "the LORD" or "God" in the Hebrew text with the Aramaic "Memra" (word) or the formula "Memra YHWH" or "Memra Elohim".[34] Examples of this substitution in the Targumim include:

- The Memra instead of the LORD regrets having made man before the flood[35] and expresses repentance in other passages such as Gen 8:21 or 1Sam 15:11,35.
- Not God or His Name, but the Memra is encountered in the *shekinah*: «I will ordain that my Memra be present».[36]
- His Memra helps and accompanies Israel in the desert, performing wonders for them.[37]
- The Memra, not God himself, is offended against.[38]

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[33] Cfr. HURTADO, *One God, One Lord*, 44-46.

[34] A classic, detailed and meticulous study on the subject is the quoted MUÑOZ LEÓN, *Dios-Palabra, Memra en los Targumim del Pentateuco*.

[35] Targ. Gen 6:6; this and the following instances are taken from the Targum Onkelos.

[36] Targ. Ex 25:22.

[37] Targ. Num 23:21.

[38] Targ. Ex 16:8.

These examples abound,[39] but the verbal substitution is not an automatic process, since Memra doesn't replace God in all occurrences. Rather, a selection is made based on certain involvements of God in the world.

Notably, the Memra is frequently used to circumvent anthropomorphisms; for instance, it often substitutes for expressions like "the mouth", "the hand" or "the voice" of God; or to mitigate anthropopathism such as the wrath or the repentance of God.[40]

However, not all instances serve this purpose. For example, God speaks in Targum Neofiti Is. 65:1 saying: «I allowed Myself to be prevailed upon by my Memra for them that did not seek me». According to Peter De Vries, «it is certain that the Memra is not only explicitly distinguished from YHWH himself in several texts, but that it is also described as a person who acts autonomously».[41]

In the words of 20th-century Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, «the Memra figures as the manifestation of divine power or as the messenger of God».[42] According to Boyarin, the activities ascribed to the Memra parallel those of Philo's Logos.[43] In fact, it functions as an instrument in the creation and revelation of God, facilitating communication with humans, bringing salvation, liberation or punishment.

In the Targumim, the action of the Word is often conflated with the action or power of God, as if it were indistinguishable from God Himself; while at other times, it is personified, suggesting a separated entity. Vries writes: «just as the logos of Philo has a semi-independent status and stands between God himself and creation the same is true of the Memra in Targum Neofiti».[44]

Moreover, an equivalence is established between the word of God and other manifestations of God's presence or action in the world, such

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[39] More examples in K. KOHLER, *Memra*, in *The Jewish Encyclopedia, vol 8., Leon-Moravia*, KTAV, New York 1964, 464-465.

[40] Cfr. M.L. KLEIN, *The Translation of Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in the Targumim*, in *Congress Volume Vienne 1980*, Brill, Leiden 1980, 162-177.

[41] P. DE VRIES, *The Targumim as Background of the Prologue of the Gospel according to John*, «Journal of Biblical Theology» 1 (2018/4) 108.

[42] KOHLER, *Memra*, 464-465.

[43] Cfr. BOYARIN, *The Gospel of the Memra*, 243-284.

[44] VRIES, *The Targumim as Background of the Prologue of the Gospel according to John*, 109.

as the name of God dwelling in the *shekhina* or the Angel of the Lord leading the people. Ultimately, akin to Philo, in Aramaic Judaism, various biblical figures of mediation (top-down) converge under a prevailing category: the word of God.

While most of the Targumim have been completed after the rise of Christianity, as Vries points out: «these are written records of traditions that are older and sometimes much older».[45] The Targumim articulate an idea which is similar, albeit not identical, to Philo's Logos, despite their different contexts.[46] According to a prevailing opinion, both phenomena unfolded independently of the rise of Christianity, even though they were roughly contemporaneous to it.[47] In conclusion, these texts bear witness to a shared Jewish thought that may have also influenced the early Christian context: the transcendent God is actively present in the world through the mediation of His Word.

IV. NT Continuity and Discontinuity with the Jewish Word

In New Testament Christology, particularly in the Pauline and Johannine texts, we discover profound connections with the explored Jewish traditions surrounding the concepts of the Word and Wisdom. Like Philo and the Targumim, both John and Paul combine the attributions to the various "top-down" mediators of the transcendent God into one singular figure.

While a proven dependence between Pauline literature and Philo is lacking, the points in common are remarkable. Philo's Logos, akin to the Christ portrayed in the Pauline *corpus*, is depicted as the Son of God, the firstborn of all things, the image of the invisible God; it serves as a mediator in creation, it sustains and accompanies the people of Israel through the desert... These parallels underscore how Paul's Christolog-

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[45] *Ibidem*, 104; Cfr. Muñoz León, *Dios-Palabra, Memra en los Targumim del Pentateuco*.

[46] Some scholars have endeavored to investigate the potential influence of Philo's Logos on the theology of the Memra in the Targumim, but this relationship remains unproven: we cannot dismiss the possibility of mutual influence, nor can we rule out the potential for parallel development. For some, it is simply seen as two distinct manifestations of a common thought within the Judaism of that era, cfr. Boyarin, *The Gospel of the Memra*, 243-284.

[47] Cfr. Muñoz León, *Dios-Palabra, Memra en los Targumim del Pentateuco*, 581.

ical conceptions maintain a strong continuity with the Jewish thought of his era.

A similar analysis applies to the Johannine literature. The fourth evangelist inherits Jewish traditions about Wisdom and the Word, and refers them to the being and mission of Christ. Themes preached about Wisdom find clear resonance in the prologue, emphasizing its presence with God at the beginning of the world, its role in creation, and its mission in the world.

Martin McNamara's classic study posits that John's doctrine and term of the Logos was shaped in synagogue theology, through the Targumim.[48] Ultimately, whether John owes his theology of the Word precisely to the Targumim or to Philo, or to some other channel of Jewish thought is a debated question. What remains clear is that John's theology of the Word has as a precedent in the Jewish tradition contemplating the role of the Word of God as a divine power through which God creates, saves, and guides His people.

To illustrate the continuity and divergence of the Johannine Logos with its Jewish roots, we can focus on its prologue.[49] Its opening verses can be read in straight continuity with his Jewish tradition: «In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God» (Jn 1:1). As showed by Daniel Boyarin, a non-Christian Jewish person, —whether from the Hellenistic milieu, akin to Philo, or a from a Palestinian context, akin to a reader of the Targumim— could

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[48] Cfr. McNamara, *Logos of the Fourth Gospel and Memra of the Palestinian Targum*, 115-117.

[49] In the context of this paper, we regard the prologue as a particularly condensed manifestation of Johannine Christology; so, we are interested in its unit as a whole, rather than in considering its hypothetical layers of redaction. While employing its distinct vocabulary, the theological notions presented in John's prologue align coherently with the overarching narrative of the entire Gospel, with these motifs recurring throughout. For further exploration of the prologue in relation to the rest of the Fourth Gospel, see D.F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: a theological commentary*, Baker, Grand Rapids 2021, 25-27; J.W. Carter, *The Prolegomena of the Fourth Gospel: Jesus, LORD and YAHWEH*, «Journal of Biblical Theology» 6 (2023) 47-48; M. Rodríguez Ruiz, *La cristología del prólogo de San Juan en la investigación joánica más reciente*, «Fortunatae» 28 (2018) 317-318; J.M. Hernández Carracedo, *El papel de las notas cristológicas del narrador en el Evangelio de Juan*, «Revista Bíblica» 80 (2018) 42-43; M.V. Fabbri, *Prologo e scopo del vangelo secondo Giovanni*, «Annales Theologici» 21 (2007) 253-278.

have written those same verses.[50] However, the departure from the pre-
vious traditions becomes significant in verse 14: «And the Word be-
came flesh». This verse is not a mere extension of what came before.
Previously, the word of God received all attributions proper to all "top-
down" mediation figures, constituting a mysterious quasi-divine figure;
but identifying it with a human being is entirely unexpected within the
Jewish tradition about the Word of God. There is no evidence of pre-
diction, prophecy or tradition foreseeing the Word coming in human
form. Thus, the incarnation of the Word introduces a genuine novelty.
Its meaning cannot be deduced from its previous traditions and its sig-
nificance may eventually contribute to the separation of Christianity
from its Jewish roots.

The innovation introduced by the Incarnation yields significant
consequences in altering the meaning and theological role of the Lo-
gos. As Vries notes, while Philo's Logos preserved God from contact
with the material realm in creation, for John, the Logos signifies a full
and direct contact of God with the world and matter. Similarly, the
word of God in the Targumim protected God's transcendence from
anthropomorphisms, but for John, the Logos becomes the ultimate an-
thropomorphism of God in His Son. «For John, it is a mystery that the
Logos, which is God himself, has become man. Those who see the only
begotten Son as the Word Incarnate, see God himself».[51]

Most of the ideas mentioned up to this point can be found in differ-
ent modern authors. Now, I would like to introduce also some personal
reflections on the subject.

The Incarnation implies also another relevant consequence: it clar-
ifies the previous ambiguity regarding the ontological status of the Lo-
gos. John modifies and, in a sense, resolves two crucial ambiguities of
the Jewish Divine Word: first, its ontological independence and, second,
its proper divinity.

Firstly, the Christian Logos is identified with the same person of
Jesus who is a distinct subject from the Father. This brings new clarity
to the Logos as a separate person. Secondly, the faith in His divinity is
not only expressed in a new and clearer way, but also it is manifested

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[50] Boyarin, *The Gospel of the Memra*, 257, 261.

[51] Vries, *The Targumim as Background of the Prologue of the Gospel according to John*, 121.

in its practical consequences. In fact, it leads to the early development of new patterns of liturgy, worship, faith, love and prayer directed to Christ alongside with the Father, of which we have enough evidence in the New Testament, as demonstrated by Hurtado.[52] So, its divinity is affirmed also in the practice.

In these two aspects, the Incarnation resolves the old ambiguities while presenting a new challenge. The redefinition of the ontological status of the Logos introduces a new relational alterity within the one God of Israel. This becomes the foundation for the future development of the Trinitarian doctrine. In fact, the distinct personality and divinity of the Logos are affirmed alongside the oneness of God, as expressed in the statement: «I and the Father are one» (Jn 10:30). We need to note that this seed of the doctrine of Trinity is absent in the Jewish documents, further supporting the idea that it is a consequence of a genuine novelty, the Incarnation.

Concisely, we must now consider the relationship between the notion of the Logos and the person of Jesus Christ, not only during his human life but also before Incarnation, approaching John's prologue as a reflection of early Christological faith, and so interpreting it in unity with the whole Gospel, as received and proclaimed in the early church. In this perspective, Jesus cannot be simply equated with the Logos, because he encompasses also his human condition: rather, he is the *incarnate* Logos. However, the Incarnation of the Logos occurs in such a manner that allows to affirm the pre-existence of the same person-subject[53] of Jesus, as indicated in various passages of the Gospel of

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[52] Two notable works wherein Hurtado elucidates this perspective are: *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* and *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, quoted also in footnote 3.

[53] We would like to avoid anachronistically applying the Christological vocabulary typical of the fifth and following centuries. Neither do we want to speak about a "subject" in the contemporary philosophical sense. However, we don't find better words than "person" and "subject" to say what we mean, namely, that the same literary character and grammatical subject that the Gospel of John calls "Jesus" can be said to pre-exist prior to his own human birth. The same subject who receives the Christological confession is said to be the Logos through whom all things were made and to have died on the cross. This is the sense in which we use indistinctively the terms "subject" and "person" here.

John.[54] Particularly and not exhaustively, Jesus himself asserts his own mysterious pre-existence in Jn 8:58: «before Abraham was, I am», and in 17:5, where he prays to the Father saying: «glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed». This understanding necessitates the recognition that the same person of Jesus preexisted as the Son, distinct and yet inseparable from the Father, even before the world.

Consequently, reading Jn 1:1-18 in unity with the whole Gospel implies that the pre-incarnate Logos should be understood as the same person-subject as Jesus. Therefore, a hypothetical understanding of the Logos as an impersonal power, whether in God or between creation and Creator, is excluded. Rather, the Christian Logos possesses a permanent personal character and is distinct from the Father. Faith in the Incarnation, therefore, illuminates and reshapes the comprehension of the Logos' ontological status, also prior to its terrestrial embodiment, affirming his personal aspect as Son of God.

For this reason, while we agree with Boyarin that a first-century non-Christian Jew could also have written «In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God», at the same time, we argue that the meaning of these words would significantly differ with the revelation of Incarnation. Previously, these words may not clearly convey a second reality in God, allowing for different interpretations. The previous discourse about the Word doesn't seek to introduce a relational alterity in God but rather to articulate two tenets of Jewish faith: God's involvement in the world and God's radical transcendence from it. Only after the Incarnation, do the confusing intuitions about the Word transform into the mysterious yet clear affirmation of a second person in God.

From our perspective, while Boyarin correctly identifying the Christian novelty in the doctrine of Incarnation, there is room for a deeper recognition of how this doctrine impacts the notion of the Logos. Boyarin asserts that the pre-existent Logos «is not (yet) Christ».[55] Strictly speaking, this assertion is accurate: Jesus is the Logos *incarnate*. However,

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[54] For example, John 3:13; 6:46.62; 8:58; 16:28; 17:5.

[55] BOYARIN, *The Gospel of the Memra*, 284.

as we have argued, even when understood as *asarkos*, the Christian notion of the Logos must be regarded as a person, who is unambiguously distinct from the Father, worshipped alongside Him. The Incarnation thus becomes a transformative step that allows for the resolution of the prior ontological ambiguity of the Logos.

Prior to the revelation of the Incarnation, a genuine affirmation of two distinct persons in one God, while perhaps vaguely foreshadowed, remains allusive due to the mentioned ambiguity. After the revelation of Incarnation, the meaning of the Logos, when understood in unity with the whole Gospel of John, no longer admits such ambiguity.

Furthermore, this novelty raises questions about its origin. Even if the Jewish theology of the Word had hinted a secondness in the Divinity, its identification with a historical man would still require an explanation. The connection between a man and the Word cannot be reduced to a development of the old ideas. Therefore, the explanation for the novelty of Incarnation must be historical: something relevant must have happened in the history of Jesus and of his followers.

V. CONCLUSION

We have presented the case of the Divine Word as a significant exemplar to explore the interplay of continuity and discontinuity between early faith in the divinity of Christ and Jewish thought. This case underscores the profound Jewish origins of this Christian belief. While we acknowledge these roots as necessary preconditions for the development of Christology, we argue that they alone are insufficient to fully account for the origin of this belief. The association of these traditions with an individual man, represents a novelty that transcends a simple evolution of ideas. This innovation transforms inherited Jewish beliefs, leading towards significant consequences such as the early worship of Christ alongside the Father and the later development of the doctrine of Trinity over centuries. Thus, within a frame of overarching continuity, a transformative novelty emerges.

The novelty of Incarnation, particularly when considered together with the scandal of the cross, cannot be adequately understood as a mere theological development within Jewish thought. Therefore, further exploration is required to give a comprehensive account of this process, recognizing the influence of historical events in shaping theo-

logical ideas. A complete understanding of the process should also consider, among other things, how Jesus' words and deeds, as well the Easter events, contributed to or catalyzed the development of those ideas. Without integrating these factors, the emergence of faith in Jesus' divinity will probably remain insufficiently explained. This recognition may point a direction for future scholarly endeavors to delve deeper into this question and, in this sense, may represent a small step towards the goal of giving a historical account of the origins of the faith in the divinity of Christ.