
How Semitic Was John? Rethinking the Hellenistic Background to John 1:1

[Anglican Theological Review](#), Fall 2003 by [Reed, David A](#)

You brought to my notice some books written by the Platonists, which had been translated from Greek into Latin. In these books I found it stated . . . "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . ." But I did not find . . . that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us"

(Augustine, Confessions VII, 9).

The gospel of John has often been viewed as the paragon of Hellenistic thought in the New Testament canon.¹ For years scholars believed that the Hellenistic influence on John was conspicuously present in the "light" and "dark" contrasts often offered by the text of the gospel.² Also, curiosity swarmed about John's use of *ho logos*-or the Divine Word. Surely this was some abstract term autochthonous to the world of Stoicism and Greek philosophical thought. But is this really the case?

Given the complexity of these issues as well as the lack of continuity concerning the Logos doctrine in New Testament scholarship, this paper will attempt to add to the ongoing discussion by looking at what a possible Jewish/Semitic reading of John 1:1 might look like. We will attempt this by tracking the concept of *ho logos* throughout a number of Jewish texts prior to, contemporaneous with, and written after the gospel of John. Obviously, given the fact that there are limitations to any article, we will not examine every possible reference to the logos in Judaism. Therefore, we will only provide a sample reading of the documents deemed most relevant and closest to the theology of John. Finally, this essay will conclude by looking for a different trajectory for the background of the logos than Greek philosophical thought; it will then attempt to add to the already voluminous readings of the prologue of John.³ We will begin our discussion by turning to the Greek text of John 1:1.

An Exegetical Discussion of John 1:1

The text of John 1:1 itself has a sordid past and a myriad of possible interpretations. With the Greek alone, we can create emphatic, orthodox, creed-like statements, or we can commit pure and unadulterated heresy. The Nestle-Aland twenty-seventh edition of John 1:1 reads: *En arche en ho logos, kai ho logos en pros ton theon, kai theos en ho logos*. A simple English translation reads: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.⁴ From the point of view of early church history, heresy develops when a misunderstanding arises concerning Greek articles, the predicate nominative, and grammatical word order. To illustrate, the early church heresy of Sabellianism understood John 1:1c to read, "and the Word was

the God"; while the early church heresy of Arianism understood John 1:1c to read, "and the word was a God."⁵ As we can easily see, these subtle nuances reveal a radical shift from the standard orthodox thinking of John 1:1c: "and the Word was God." Yet from a historical perspective, what should we make of this ho logos?

From the textual evidence of the Septuagint (LXX) it seems reasonable to suggest that John's en arche (in the beginning) may be an allusion to Genesis 1:1, which in the LXX also reads: en arche.⁶ But, it is also quite possible that the translators of the LXX are providing us with an interpretation of the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1.⁷ The issue is far from solved, however, when we consider the tension created by b'reshith, the Hebrew equivalent of en arche. As readers of the Bible, we may desire never to see tensions in the biblical text, but reality is a far different situation. We will return to our discussion of John 1:1 shortly, but first we must examine the intricacies of the word b'reshith.

A Closer Look at B'reshith

B'reshith has its share of problems. Advanced students of Hebrew have likely encountered "other" translations for this word than the run-of-the-mill "in the beginning." Even among leading English translations of the Bible, there tends to be ample disagreement.⁸ In fact, an old joke has arisen in some circles: "Where is the first place that scholars disagree over the translation of a passage in the Bible?" The answer is a sobering: "Genesis one, verse one, word one!" But why?

Since the latter half of the tenth century B.C.E., scholars have recognized that Hebrew words are composed of trilateral roots—that is to say, every Hebrew word has a three-letter, consonantal root that is the "backbone" of its very essence.⁹ Given this, it seems plausible to suggest that b'reshith follows similar grammatical rules. The stock understanding of b'reshith is that its root is rosh (possibly reshith¹⁰), which often has the meaning of "head" or "first" once it is brought over from the Hebrew into the English.¹¹ If the b of b'reshith is understood as a simple preposition—usually meaning "in"—then it would be reasonable to suggest that b'reshith means "in the first" or possibly "in/at the head of,"¹² which of course would make better sense in English as the traditional "in the beginning." Yet the Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna¹³ offers an alternative to this translation, based upon other ancient Near Eastern sources.

Sarna proposes translating Genesis 1:1 as "When God began to create."¹⁴ This translation may seem rather mundane at first, but the subtle nuance created by this rendition has theological implications that are titanic. Briefly, if we stay with the traditional "in the beginning" we are forced to accept that prior to creation, there was nothing—nothing, save God.¹⁵ If we accept Sarna's translation, however, then we might ponder whether there was something before the creation of the "heavens" and the "earth" as we now know them.¹⁶ Furthermore, Sarna's translation makes sense in light of other ancient Near Eastern creation myths.

There is a tendency among Near Eastern creation tales to begin their texts with "when" as opposed to "in the beginning." For example, the Babylonian creation story, Enuma Elish,¹⁷ begins with "when." Enuma Elish means "when on high," which is the first line of this mythic poem.¹⁸ Also, a number of scholars have noted that the root *rosh* for *b'reshith* is but a guess; the true meaning of the word is a mystery. Thus, we might agree with Sarna that *b'reshith* should be understood as "when" and not as "in"; but our agreement with this should go beyond the evidence from the Enuma Elish, for the Bible itself is aware of something being in existence prior to the creation of the "heavens and the earth."

Other Biblical Texts Relating to Creation

Once Genesis 1:1 is understood as reading "When God began to create the heavens and the earth," as opposed to the more traditional "In the beginning God created," a subtle nuance (see previous section) is finally revealed. With a translation such as "when" we can ask the question: Was there something before God started the creation process of the heavens and the earth? Startling as this query may be, it is worth looking at the internal evidence of the biblical canon for an answer, considering that Scripture is well aware of wisdom being in existence prior to the creation of the cosmos. Consider this significant passage from the book of Proverbs: "The Lord made me the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was formed, before the establishment of the earth. . . . When he made the heavens, I was already there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep" (8:22-27).¹⁹ In context the author of Proverbs is speaking of wisdom. Thus, the passage suggests that the writer is well aware of wisdom's existence prior to the creation of the world.

The text of Jeremiah also betrays this point as the prophet and/or God asserts, "But the Lord God is true . . . who made the earth with his power, established the world with his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens" (Jer. 10:10, 12) [*italics mine*].²⁰ For the sake of keeping the biblical text in a harmonious congruency, it seems that Sarna is correct in opining that Genesis 1:1 should read "When," leaving open the possibility of something being in existence prior to the creation of the "heavens and the earth." What that "something" is, as far as the biblical text is concerned, is wisdom. Furthermore, John's gospel is also aware of this "something else" being in existence prior to the creation of the heavens and the earth.²¹ Wisdom's connection with John, however, is far from complete, for the idea of wisdom continued to evolve, especially in the apocryphal, pseudepigraphal, and rabbinic texts of later periods—some before John, some contemporaneous with John, and some after John.

The Wisdom Tradition in Other Jewish

Sources Outside of the Biblical Canon

The apocryphal texts²² and the pseudepigraphal texts²³ are well aware of this tradition of wisdom found in Proverbs and in Jeremiah. Sirach continues it with, "Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me [wisdom]" (Sir. 24:9).²⁴ It is also during the period of the apocryphal writings that the idea of wisdom being present with God during the creation process—even possibly assisting in the process—develops. In The Wisdom of Solomon (latter part of the first century B.C.E.) we find, "With you [God] is wisdom, she knows your works, and was present when you made the world (Wis. of Sol. 9:9)."²⁵ However, we should note something else that is peculiar to the Geschichte of the apocryphal writings.

The Wisdom-Word-Law Connection

During the composition of the apocryphal works, a strange amalgamation evolved between the Greek sophia (wisdom) and the Greek logos (word). This concatenation is intriguing, because the apocryphal writings tend to view wisdom and word as synonymous. Consider the parallel lines of The Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2: "O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word (logos), and by your wisdom (sophia) have formed humankind to have dominion over the creatures you have made." Furthermore, the pseudepigraphal 2 Enoch, though not connecting wisdom and word directly, is also well aware of the aforementioned wisdom being present prior to the creation of the heavens and the earth. As its writer states, "And on the sixth day I commanded my wisdom to create humankind" (30:8).²⁶ The Dead Sea Scrolls (approximately 100 B.C.E.-200 C.E.) and Philo of Alexandria (15 C.E.-50 C.E.) espouse a similar tradition as they relate, respectively, "Blessed is he who created the earth with his power, who established the world with his Wisdom (HQPsa Hymn to the Creator)" and "who is to be considered the daughter of God²⁷ but Wisdom, who is the firstborn mother of all things" (Questions in Genesis 4:97). Thus, at this point we can at least hypothesize that John, as a Jewish writer, might well have been aware of wisdom's being present with God prior to and during the creation process, and that the gospel writer, like the writer of the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, might have seen a connection between logos and sophia. Despite this, we must also ask whether or not it is possible that John was aware of another congruent line of thought regarding wisdom and creation. In the writings of the rabbis we find, "Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, 'In the beginning God created,' 'beginning' referring to the Torah, as in the verse, The Lord made me as the beginning of his way" [Prov. 8:22].²⁸ The Sifre on Deuteronomy 11:10 proclaims a similar point: "The Law, highly prized [literally, dearer] than everything, was created before everything."²⁹ Thus, the rabbis seem to have expounded upon the origin of wisdom, moving it from an inchoate idea to a complete theology that embodied the entire corpus of Scripture—the Torah. This, however, is not surprising, as we will see below.

The Logos-Torah Interchange

The Greek logos has a connection with the Hebrew Torah (or in Greek nomos). Several times the LXX uses logos (word) to refer to the Torah either literally or in an abstract form. We can translate Exodus 35:1 in the LXX as "And Moses assembled all the congregation of the sons of Israel and he spoke to them these words (logoi) that the Lord commanded them to do." What the Lord commands here in Exodus makes up what eventually will be the Torah (or the Law); we should not miss the fact that Exodus 35:1 connects logos with these very commandments or Torah of the Lord.³⁰ Deuteronomy 1:1 in the LXX issues forth the same point, stating, "These are the words [logoi] that Moses spoke to all Israel." Again, the logoi (words) that Moses speaks will become the building blocks of Torah. In fact, in some manuscripts, the LXX renders Psalm 119:105 in such a way as to make the connection between the word of God (logos) and the law of God (nomos) explicit. Most manuscripts of Psalm 119:115 read, "Your word [logos] is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path," but some LXX manuscripts substitute "your law [nomos]" for "your word," creating a connection between these two entities. This suggests that some Jewish writers and translators had no qualms about replacing logos with nomos (that is, substituting "Torah" for "word"), again, as this essay is arguing, because the two terms became synonymous in Jewish thought. Another example of this is Philo, who was likely dependent upon the LXX. He also equates the word and the law in his *De Emigratione Abrahami* 130, where he states, "The Law [nomos] is nothing else but the divine Logos prescribing what one should do and prohibiting what one should not do."³¹

The significance of these word-wisdom and word-law connections cannot be underestimated. When we consider the connection between wisdom (sophia) and law (nomos), the importance of these amalgams is self-evident. This connection is displayed most prominently in Sirach 24:23, which relates, "All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law [nomos] that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob." In context, the "All this" of Sirach 24:23 refers to wisdom, which, subsequently, most of the book of Sirach spends its time expounding and explicating. Using some simple logic, we note that if Sirach understands "the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded" to be directly related to "all this," or wisdom, then not only are sophia and logos related, but so are nomos and sophia. Baruch 4:1 betrays knowledge of this point, for there we find written, "She is the book of the commandments of God, the law (nomos) that endures forever. All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die." The epithet "she" is typical for wisdom in the apocryphal writings, and Baruch 4:1 is no exception to this rule. Thus, Baruch, like Sirach, connects wisdom with law. So where does this leave us?

A Summary of the Word-Wisdom-Law Connection up to this Point

What is developing here is quite simple: word (logos), wisdom (sophia), and law (nomos) are interchangeable and synonymous (in all fairness, any reader of the texts cannot speak of one without speaking of the other).

The biblical canon originally understood wisdom as being in existence prior to the creation of the world, and the later writers of the apocryphal texts expanded wisdom to include the word and the law. Eventually the rabbis parted with wisdom and settled for Torali, or law (or so it seems, based on an observation of their writings). This is not a new observation-few things are-for several scholars, such as Raymond Brown and C. K. Barrett, observed this line of thought in the last few decades of the twentieth century.³² What is amazing is that even though Brown and Barrett saw this connection, they did not do enough, or so we believe, to emphasize the theological importance of it with regard to the prologue of the gospel of John.

A Proposal for How to Translate John 1:1 in Semitic Terminology

To put this as succinctly as possible, Jacobus Schoneveld, who also noted the connection between word, wisdom, and law, offers these thoughts: "If it is generally recognized that Wisdom equals Torah and that Wisdom equals Logos, it seems . . . quite possible to close the triangle and conclude that Logos equals Torah. If a Jew heard about 'The Word' [ho logos] in such an absolute use, he [sic] could hardly help but think of the Torah."³³ As the thesis of this article suggested, John's gospel is well aware of this, for in John 10:35-36 we read, "If those to whom the word [logos] of God came were called 'gods'-and the scripture [graphe] cannot be annulled-can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son?'" The connection here is simple: graphe, which means Scripture, or more likely, Torah (that is, what is recognized as the canon of the Hebrew Bible in John's day³⁴) is juxtaposed with logos, or the word. Again, the two are seen as equals.

In John 5:38-39 we also see this connection as John relates, "and you do not have his word [ton logon] abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. You search the scriptures [tas graphas] because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf." Furthermore, we find the most complete rendition of this combination of word, wisdom, and law in John 15:25, which states, "It was to fulfill the word [ho logos] that is written [gegrammenos] in their law [to nomo], 'They hated me without a cause.'" Thus, based on this evidence, we draw the conclusion that John was well aware of the fact that these three terms could be used interchangeably just as they often were in extra-biblical, Jewish texts.

We suggest, then, that John's prologue should be translated, "In the beginning was the Torah, and the Torah was toward God, and Godlike was the Torah,"³⁵ as opposed to the more traditional "In the beginning was the Word," which betrays the scholarly assumption that John is a Hellenistic gospel or a Gnostic text.³⁶ If this proposal is not acceptable, at the very least we have to entertain the possibility that when John speaks of the word, he is not limited to a philosophical interpretation of the Logos. We argue this, because texts prior to, contemporary with, and after John's gospel testify to the multiple meanings of ho logos, which are not limited

to, but which do include wisdom and law as possible interpretations. There is no reason, however, to limit our investigation of the background of John's Logos doctrine to extra-biblical Jewish texts. Thus, we will now turn to the world of ancient Egypt to discover that a Logos doctrine existed in the ancient Near East well before it was conceived by the Greeks or utilized by the Jews.

Looking to Egypt for the Logos (Why Even Look to Greece?)

Egyptologists have long been aware of the presence of a Logos doctrine in the text known as "The Memphite Theology of Creation." In its extant form it dates to approximately 700 B.C.E., but is likely a derivation from an original text sometime in the third millennium B.C.E. According to Matthews and Benjamin, "One version of the hymn, copied on a slab of black granite known as the Shabaka Stone, was recovered by British archaeologists in Egypt in the 1830s."³⁷ Whoever wrote the hymn composed it in an archaic style similar to the Pyramid Texts, with the sole purpose of validating the emergence of the centrality of the town of Memphis during the First Dynasty. Thus, the hymn is of a celebratory character, lauding the creative activities of the god Ptah, the divine patron of Memphis, as the supreme creator, as opposed to the god Atum, the divine patron of Heliopolis. Furthermore, the hymn functions to substantiate the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt into one nation.

For the purposes of this paper, we should take note of the following lines from this hymn:

There came into being as the heart and there came into being as the tongue (something) in the form of Atum. The mighty Great One is Ptah, who transmitted [life to all gods], as well as (to) their ka's, through his heart, by which Thoth became Ptah.³⁸

John Wilson's translation, though very colloquial, points to the fact that at the beginning of Egyptian history there was an approach to a Logos doctrine in the creation of Atum by the "tongue," "speech," or "word" of Ptah. Egyptologist John Currid, though not specifically touching on the doctrine of the Logos, has also observed the importance of "The Memphite Theology of Creation" for biblical studies in his book *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*. Currid argues, rather convincingly, for a reevaluation of the background of the Genesis creation story, suggesting that it is not a product of Mesopotamian sources but of Egyptian.³⁹ Anyone familiar with Genesis can easily recall God's creative activity by the spoken word, much like we find in "The Memphite Theology of Creation."

The German scholar L. Durr espoused similar ideas in the 1930s in his article "Die Wertung des gottlichen Wortes."⁴⁰ Following his lead, the famed American archaeologist W. F. Albright came to similar conclusions concerning the background of the Logos in his *From the Stone Age to Christianity*.⁴¹ Albright even postulated a possible Sumerian background to the Logos in the word *enem*. Albright believed that both Sumerian and Canaanite texts displayed the divine voice (possibly an antecedent of the Logos) in thunder. This would, according to Albright, "[make] the voice of a god act as a distinct entity with power of its own,"⁴² and it

would give us a background for the Logos doctrine from Egyptian, Sumerian, and Canaanite sources some 2,000 years or so before the introduction of such a concept among the Greeks.

This study has already determined that when John speaks of the Logos he has at his command several synonymous terms. Furthermore, it has shown that the LXX and the apocryphal writings used word, wisdom, and law interchangeably, and it has demonstrated that the internal evidence of John's gospel shows that he is quite comfortable in linking the Logos with the Scriptures (graphe) or the Torah. Furthermore, this paper has suggested that in light of this evidence John 1:1 should read, "In the beginning was the Torah" as opposed to the more traditional "In the beginning was the Word." After having surveyed the Egyptian, Canaanite, and Sumerian evidence, this essay now suggests the possibility that John did not have to venture into the Hellenistic world for his Logos doctrine: he could have easily drawn from the wells of a rich Near Eastern tradition that had begun the development of a Logos doctrine thousands of years before the Greeks developed their own. We will now look at some possibilities of what a Semitic understanding of John 1:1 might mean.

If John 1:1 is about the Torah, Then What?

Given the clear Near Eastern background of the Logos doctrine and the melange of material from the LXX, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, and rabbinic texts, several false assumptions about John need to be put to rest. One of these false assumptions is the proclamation that John's gospel was influenced solely by Gnosticism.⁴³ Though it is not the intention of this paper to enter into a detailed discussion of Gnosticism and its influences upon Judaism and Christianity and vice versa,⁴⁴ the material presented in this article makes a clear case against John having to draw from the teachings of the Gnostics in order to compose the prologue of his gospel. He could just as easily have drawn from a Near Eastern repository of ideas. It is true that a Logos doctrine existed in Gnosticism. We need to look no further than the Gnostic Gospel of Truth, which relates, "The Word [ho logos] who came from pleroma⁴⁵ who is in the thought and mind of the Father, the Word [ho logos] who is called the Savior."⁴⁶ However, given that many of the Gnostic texts were written after John's time, it is more plausible to suggest that John's thinking influenced the Gnostics and not the other way around.⁴⁷ Perhaps C. H. Dodd put it best with his pithy comment that "no Hellenistic thinker would see a climax in the Incarnation, just as no Gnostic would triumphantly proclaim that the Word had become flesh"- something which John had no qualms doing.⁴⁸

Another dispute that should perhaps be laid to rest is the occasional scholarly assumption that John 1:1's ho logos is really a reference to the Targumic⁴⁹ memra. Though we should not dismiss the influence of the Aramaic Targums on the gospel of John, we must consider siding with Albright and Barrett⁵⁰ who view the memra as a simple circumlocution for the divine name, YHWH.⁵¹ Thus, as this paper has already shown, we

must consider the possibility of turning to the Near Eastern world and to the word-wisdom-law triangle (noted above) in order to properly understand the prologue of John.

Conclusion

If John is speaking of the Torah in his prologue, then his audience past and present must be aware that the gospel's theology is quite the superlative. In other words, the Christology of the New Testament is a high one, even at the end of the first century C.E. It is only later that we find a decline in Christological thought and expression.⁵² The pinnacle of John's Christology is found in verse 14 of the prologue. Here John triumphantly asserts that the Logos "became flesh and dwelt among us" [*italics mine*].⁵³ Given this essay's revised understanding of John's Logos Doctrine, what John is proclaiming is unique: The Torah became flesh and the Torah dwelt among us.⁵⁴ It is unique, because the word for "dwelt" in Greek (*skene*) can also mean "a tent" or "a tabernacle." John's Logos, now perhaps understood properly as the Torali, did not so much "dwell with humanity" as it "tabernacled" with us for a bit. Regarding this, N. T. Wright has suggested that John's prologue takes the two most important incarnational symbols of Judaism, the Torah and the Tabernacle (or Temple), and applies them to Jesus.⁵⁵ As C. K. Barrett once opined, what readers past and present are to understand from this is that "John intends . . . the whole of his gospel [to] be read in the light of this verse [John 1:14]."⁵⁶ Thus, the written law, the books so often ignored by Christians because of their endless genealogies and endless rubrics for how to do this and not to do that, became, for John, flesh. The written Torah became the living Torah—the Incarnation, Jesus. In sum, John's was a Jewish thought, and not a Hellenistic one.

1 For an overview of current thoughts on the gospel of John, see D. Moody Smith, "John," in the Harper Collins Bible Commentary, rev. ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 956-986; G. R. Beasley-Murray, John (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, Tex.: Word Publishers, 1989); G. R. Beasley-Murray, Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991); Gary M. Burge, Interpreting the Fourth Gospel (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1992); Rodney A. Whitacre, John (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999); Raymond Brown, The Gospel of John I-XII (New York: Doubleday, 1966), xxi-xxiii. Though a bit dated, Brown still offers an adequate sampling of Hellenistic versus Semitic approaches to John.

2 With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), thinking has changed regarding this issue. Current scholarship tends to see the terms "light" and "dark" as well within the milieu of second Temple Judaism (approximately 200 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.). For a helpful summary of current views, see James Vanderkam, The Dead Sea Scrolls Today (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), chapter 6, esp. 182-183. Also, some scholars have tended to discuss the influence of Zoroastrianism and its dualistic "light" and "dark" concepts on second Temple Judaism and the New Testament. For a history of Zoroastrianism,

as well as a healthy review of the issues involved, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 395-466.

3 We should note that in contrast to this thesis, the following are recent works that take an opposite approach: C. Marvin Pate, *Communities of the Last Days: The Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament, and the Story of Israel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), esp. 227-228; James D. G. Dunn, "Let John be John: A Gospel for its Time," *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 28 (Tubingen: Mohr, 1983), 309-339; and Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series* 71 (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1992), esp. 88-170.

4 All English translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

5 For further elaboration on this verse see Daniel B. Wallace, *An Exegetical Syntax of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995). Also see A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1934), 623; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 116; N. A. Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1965), 17. For Sabellianism see the entry for "Monarchians" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), 448-451. For a short review of Arianism, see Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas: Word, 1995), 99-107, as well as Rowan Williams, *Arms; Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002) and Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

6 See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 151, and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 4, for similar views concerning the relationship of the Hebrew of Genesis to the LXX's rendering.

7 See J. Braun, *Les grandes traditions d'Israel*. Brauns overall thesis is that many passages from John are taken directly from the Hebrew Bible as opposed to the LXX. If Braun is right, several things may be worth considering: (1) John is not dependent on the LXX, and thus John's "in the beginning" and the LXXs "in the beginning" may be independent of one another and not related; (2) John may be providing his own interpretation of Genesis 1:1 (see below); even so, it seems plausible that "in the beginning" is some kind of reference to Genesis 1:1. Other scholars who have posited a Hebrew/Aramaic origin for all or for portions of the gospels include Jean Carmignac, *Birth of the Synoptic Gospels*, trans. Michael J. Wrenn (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1987) and Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998).

8 The point can easily be illustrated by surveying the NIV, NRSV, NJB, and REB in relation to the JPS (Jewish Publication Society).

9 Of course the real situation is a bit more complicated, but in most cases, Hebrew words are built on three-letter or triliteral roots. For an introduction to the history of Hebrew lexicography, see W. Creighton Marlowe, "A Summary Evaluation of Old

Testament Hebrew Lexica, Translations, and Philology in Light of Key Developments in Hebrew Lexicographic and Semitic Linguistic History," *Grace Theological Journal* 12:1 (1991): 3-8.

10 For further discussion see entries 7218 and 7225 in *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), from now on referred to as BDB, as well as Gleason L. Archer, Bruce Waltke, and Robert Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 825-826, from now on referred to as TWOT.

11 The "rosh" of the familiar Jewish holiday Rosh HaShanah may be the "rosh" of the Hebrew word *b'reshith*. Roughly, Rosh HaShanah translates as "the head [rosh] of the year"-that is, "new year." This is similar to what is going on in Genesis with the phrase, "in the beginning."

12 One problem with the word *b'reshith* is that it is likely anarthrous; in other words, it lacks a definite article. If such is the case, the *b* can only mean "in," and not "in the" as so many English translations suggest. If we accept this, then we must look for other possible translations than "in the beginning." This essay will develop these other possibilities below.

13 See Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 5. For others who agree with Sarna, see Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964); and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974).

14 See the JPS English translation of the Scriptures. Also we should note that some English translations wrestle with the difficulty of this verse by adding a footnote. See, for example, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV)*. Furthermore, we should observe the Samaritan pronunciation of *b'reshith*; see the text-critical apparatus for Genesis 1:1 in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (American Bible Society; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Also, according to the critical apparatus, Origen may have had some difficulty in understanding the exact meaning of *b'reshith*, for he renders this in Greek as *bresith* or possibly *bareseth* (-seth). It may be conjecture to assume Origen's difficulties; further work needs to be done on this issue.

15 For a delineation of the possible translations of Genesis 1:1, see John Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978, 1994), 97.

16 For a complete listing of all possible translations of Genesis 1:1 with mention of their theological implications, see G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15: Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 11-15. Also, we should note that Wenham disagrees with Sarna and others concerning the translation of Genesis 1:1, opting instead for the more traditional "in the beginning." Wenham's proposals include a list of other scholars who disagree with Sarna.

17 For a complete reading of this epic, see A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). Parts of the epic can also be found in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969). From now on this work will be referred to as ANET. For a less scholarly version of this epic, see Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1991, 1997). Furthermore, it is important to point out that Kenneth Kitchen has convincingly argued that the *Enuma Elish* may in fact have little to do with the Genesis story. For

Kitchen, though he admits to some parallels, the differences outweigh the similarities (for example, Kitchen insists that the creation of human beings in Enuma Elish is a secondary point to the story, while in Genesis it is the main point). For further discussion, see Kenneth Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 26-27.

18 The Atrahasis epic may have a similar beginning as well. Kitchen argued years ago that the Genesis story was much more similar to Atrahasis than to the Enuma Elish (private communication with James K. Hoffmeier, Trinity International University). More recently, Issac Kikiwada and Arthur Quinn have voiced a similar opinion in *Before Abraham Was: A Provocative Challenge to the Documentary Hypothesis* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985). For an English translation of the Atrahasis epic, see Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 31-40.

19 This paper is following Kugel's translation of this particular passage. For a more thorough discussion of this text and its relation to the Genesis creation account, see James Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1997), 53-57.

20 Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*, 53-57. The reader may also wish to consider other texts such as Psalm 104:24 and Proverbs 3:19.

21 Not only is John 1:1 aware of this, with its "In the beginning was the Word," but so also is John 17:5 where Jesus speaks of himself as being with the Father prior to the creation of the world.

22 We suggest considering a date ranging from 200 B.C.E. to about 100 C.E. The apocryphal texts have largely been preserved in Greek translation, though originally many of the texts appeared in Hebrew and/or Aramaic. See, for instance, the prologue to Ecclesiasticus (the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach), written around 180 B.C.E., which avers, "For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language." For a short introduction to the Apocrypha and its writings (as well as issues of canonization and Western versus Eastern traditions regarding these texts), see the pertinent articles in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, and *The Revised English Bible*. For a thorough introduction to the material of the Apocrypha, see Bruce Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford, 1957).

23 For a short introduction to the pseudepigraphal works, see the entry in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 629-631, and James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Prolegomena for the Study of Christian Origins* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1985 and 1998).

24 The context of Sirach suggests "wisdom"; Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*, follows this same idea.

25 The context suggests that the "you" is referring to God.

26 Authors translation. We should note that the standard date for 2 Enoch is some time in the first century C.E. For a short introduction to the books of Enoch see Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 184-185, and Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 88-89.

27 Leviticus Rabba 20:7, Song of Songs Rabba 8:13, and Sanhedrin 101a.

28 Genesis Rabba 1:1; The Soncino Midrash Rabba (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Davka Corp., 1995). The midrashic writings are notoriously difficult to date. They cover a period from at least (perhaps at most) 100 B.C.E. to 300 C.E., yet most of their heritage is oral as opposed to written. Though we think it is quite possible that John was aware of the traditions of the later rabbis, we also count ourselves, humbly, among a group of scholars who believe that one must use extreme caution when utilizing rabbinic works to elucidate a passage from the New Testament. Thus, we do not think that midrash is as glacier-like as some would suggest. This principle espouses the utilization of quotations from medieval rabbis based on this glacier theory and then reads them back into the world of first-century Palestine. For an excellent example of this procedure, see Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995). Though it may be true that what was said (orally) in one generation rolls along (like a glacier) until it is committed to writing by a later generation, it seems rather precarious to arbitrarily put late texts into the mouths of Jesus or Paul or the gospel writers to prove a theological point that may or may not have existed in the first century. A cursory reading of scholars such as Raymond Brown, James Charlesworth, and Joseph Fitzmyer will show similar cautionary remarks. Furthermore, Brad Young, though he approves of this "glacier theory," has stated that it is rather difficult to know what the halacha was in Jesus and Paul's day (private communication). This suggests a need-even in this very article-to exercise caution when utilizing texts that were committed to writing years after the composition of the gospels to explain material found in the gospels. For more on this, see David Instone Brewer, "Review Article: The Use of Rabbinic Sources in Gospel Studies," *Tyndale Bulletin* 50/2 (1999): 281-298; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 11-12; and Philip S. Alexander, "Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 74 (1983): 244. Alexander states that anyone who does not reckon with the possibility of a profound discontinuity between Judaism before and Judaism after the catastrophes of 70 C.E. and 135 C.E. is likely to lapse into "massive and sustained anachronism. . . . The way in which NT scholars without more ado read back into pre-70 Judaism post-70 Rabbinic traditions is totally unjustified."

29 See George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927-1930; reprint, 3 vols. in 2, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 266.

30 For an overview of the meaning of Torah in Jewish thought, see Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 18-30.

31 Jacobus Schoneveld, "The Torah in the Flesh (A New Reading of the Prologue of the Gospel of John as a Contribution to a Christology without Anti-Judaism)," *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990): 77-94.

32 See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, and C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*.

33 Schoneveld, "The Torah in the Flesh," 79.

34 The debate on the canon is quite extensive. We contend that it is specious reasoning to suggest that the canon was complete at Yavneh in 90 C.E. The Christian canon obviously took much longer to form than the Jewish canon, and thus it is

difficult to discuss issues of eanonicity when it comes to the gospels. However, we believe it is safe to assume that what we call the "First Five Books of Moses," traditionally, the Pentateuch (or Torah), were well established by John's day (85-100 C.E.). For an introduction to the Old Testament canon see William LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 598-605.

35 This translation is provided by Schoneveld, "The Torah in the Flesh," 80.

36 Obviously there are difficulties with this translation. It is not the intention of this essay to discuss those difficulties. However, we are well aware of the confusion that would suddenly arise if English translations of John 1:1 read, "In the beginning was the Torah." At most, we hope, by means of this article, to establish a praxis among translators which explains some of the more Semitic nuances of *ho logos*, and to urge translators to consider the possibility of providing a footnote to John 1:1 which considers the possibility that John, as a Jewish writer, might have had the Torah in mind when he wrote *ho logos*. Other, more qualified scholars will have to deal with the question of John's definition of the Torah. Furthermore, others will need to explore why, if John equated *ho logos* with the Torah, no other writer in the canonical New Testament engaged in such a practice.

37 See Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 3.

38 See Pritchard, *ANET*, 4-5.

39 The importance of Currid's argument cannot be underestimated. In current archaeological research many Near Eastern archaeologists and historians argue for a reevaluation of biblical Israel's past, postulating such extreme theses that they ultimately end up denying the historicity of the Exodus or any involvement that Israel may have had with Egypt during the second millennium B.C.E. If Currid is correct in his arguments, as we believe he may be, then it seems specious reasoning to argue that Israel had no contact with Egypt when Genesis betrays knowledge of ancient Egyptian myths and ideologies that date back to the third millennium C.E. For further elaboration, see John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1997), 53-73.

40 See L. Durr, *Die Wetung des gottlichen Wortes* (Mitt. Vord.-aeg. Ges., XLII:I, 1938) quoted in W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), 371-372.

41 See esp. 195, 371-372.

42 See Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 371.

43 Thomas H. Tobin, "Logos" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:353; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971); J. M. Robinson, "Jesus as Sophos and Sophia: Wisdom Tradition and the Gospels," *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. R. L. Wilken (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1975), 1-16; John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 348.

44 For more on this as well as the "evidence" for pre-Christian forms of Gnosticism, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London: Tyndale Press, 1973).

45 It is somewhat unclear what *pleroma* means in this context. Usually it is understood as "fullness" or "completion." Because of the difficulty of its meaning in this passage, we have chosen not to translate it.

46 See Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 519-524 for a fuller treatment of the issue of Gnosticism and the gospel of John.

47 Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 519-524.

48 Dodd, cited in Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 24.

49 For a short introduction to the Targums, see Metzger and Coogan, *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 754-755.

50 Though a bit dated, some of the best cautionary remarks concerning the *memra* are found in the article by George F. Moore, "Intermediaries," *Harvard Theological Review* 15 (1922): 41-45.

51 See Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 371-372, and Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 153. Barrett believes that *memra* is not a hypostasis (that is, an intermediary) but is in fact an alternative way of speaking of God. We should equate this to the modern Jewish practice of speaking of God using *HaShem* as opposed to *Adonai* and certainly never *YHWH*.

52 This paper, then, sides with the thesis of Ben Witherington, III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), over and against the thesis of James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996). Witherington's general thesis suggests that throughout the entire canon of the New Testament the Christology is "high." It is only during the second and third centuries C.E. that we find a decline in Christological thought and expression. Dunn argues for almost the exact opposite. In his opinion the Christology of the New Testament starts out "low" but ends on a "high" note. The church further strengthens this in the second and third centuries C.E. Though it is not the intention of this paper to discuss the Christology of the New Testament in detail, it is our opinion that the Christology of the New Testament documents *Ls* consistently "high." Confusion arises when we forget that the texts of the New Testament spoke of Christology in a "Jewish" way, while the church of the second and third centuries C.E. spoke of it in a "Greek" or "Latin" way. Therefore, Christology did not so much change from "high" to "low" or from "low" to "high," as did the language used to describe it.

53 Interestingly, with this verse, John's gospel is likely influencing another Gnostic text written between the first and second centuries C.E. In the *Odes of Solomon* we find, "For the dwelling-place [tabernacle] of the Word is man [or a son of man], and his [or its] truth is love (12:12)."

54 Ray Fritz has argued that this verse may be a reference to a Jewish tradition that the Messiah will come during the feast of Tabernacles. The rationale behind this is that the word "dwelt" (*skene*) can be understood as "tabernacled"; thus an allusion to the feast. If this is the case, we may have here a birth story in the gospel of John. See Ray Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988). This tradition is also noted in a less scholarly work by Barney Kasdan, *God's Appointed Times: A Practical Guide for Understanding and Celebrating the Biblical Holidays* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1993), 95.

55 N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 110, and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 405-407, 411. Inter-textual evidence throughout John's gospel continues this practice. For example, John depicts Jesus equating himself with the manna of the Exodus in 6:22-40 and he depicts Jesus equating himself with the feast of Dedication (more widely known as Hanukkah) in 8:12-20.

56 Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 156.

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