On the Reference of αὐτόν in John 1.10

by Jason Hare

⁶ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης· ⁷οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι᾽ αὐτοῦ. ⁸οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ᾽ ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. ⁹ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. ¹⁰ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. ¹¹εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ¹²ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ¹³οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ᾽ ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.

John 1.6-13, NA28

The biblical languages forum on CARM[1] occasions discussions about all kinds of aspects of Hebrew and Greek language. Of course, nearly everyone who participates on that forum does so as an amateur, someone who enjoys studying and discussing issues related to language and grammar, and not as a professional linguist or scholar of biblical languages. Each person offers what he[2] has gathered from his own studies and reading to contribute to the overall interest of the forum community. Some have their pet topics and hobby horses. The most commonly discussed topic that appears on this message board and has essentially nothing to do with the study of either Greek or Hebrew is that of the Trinity or the classification of Jesus as God, man or something in between.

Yet, those who frequently bring up the topic of the Trinity – somehow managing to work it into the discussion of every single thread on the forum – attempt to case the argument in terms of Greek (and rarely Hebrew) grammar and syntax. Thus, what essentially boils down to a dogmatic position is wrapped up in terms such as antecedence, *constructio ad sensum,* epexegetical genitives, convertible propositions,

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1. I have created a short URL redirect from my website here: **thehebrewcafe.com/carm.**
2. At this point, we have not had any women participating on this forum for some time.

simple apposition, synecdoche, *et cetera*. Much of this wrapping has nothing to do with the concepts truly being discussed, which could be handled completely in English without recourse to the Greek language. In fact, obsessing over such discussions on this forum apparently qualifies one to make judgments about the Greek language generally and also to sit in judgment on students of the language – declaring who knows Greek and who does not simply on the basis of these topics, and certainly not by actually gauging their ability to read and understand the language.

A good example of the problems created when one attempts to crouch his argument in terms of grammar without really taking syntax into account is the focus of this article: the appearance of αὐτόν in John 1.10. The entire passage has been quoted above for the sake of context. In this article, I will present the argument of these less-than-serious students of Greek, discuss the motivation behind the argument and then present my critique of the argument along with a proper treatment of the syntax of the passage.

John Milton's Argument

Personal pronouns (like *he, she, it, they*) often stand in for nouns for efficiency in expression. It is most common for a pronoun to refer directly back (as an *anaphor*, see below) to the most recent noun to which it can refer. This is the simplest use of a pronoun in any language. We see this in the following example from English:

(1)   John$_i$ lives in Tel Aviv, where he$_i$ works for AmDocs.

In this example, *he* functions anaphorically. The word **anaphor** (ἀναφορά) comes to us from Greek ἀνα- *up* and φέρω *carry*. An anaphor carries your attention up to a previous sentence in order to understand who it's referring to. The thing to which an anaphor refers is called the **antecedent**, from Latin meaning *coming before*. We use **index** letters to show how an anaphor relates to its antecedent.

Since the αὐτόν is unambiguously masculine in gender and the nearest relevant noun that precedes it is τὸ φῶς, it is argued that τὸ φῶς is the antecedent of αὐτόν. In order for this to take place, the "natural gender" of τὸ φῶς is assumed to be masculine and αὐτόν refers to this natural gender through *constructio ad sensum* (see below). The natural gender of τὸ φῶς (which is grammatically neuter) is derived from the fact that it is really referring to ὁ λόγος of verse 1, which is (grammatically) masculine. Thus, the natural gender of τὸ φῶς is really the *grammatical* gender of ὁ λόγος. And, therefore, when the text says that ὁ κόσμος δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω, it means that the world came into being through *the light* (it) and the world did not recognize *the light* (it). It should not be translated, according to this argument, in the way that the majority of translations render it, to say that the world came into existence through *him* (Jesus) and the world did not recognize *him* (Jesus). The purpose of this argument is to state that the αὐτόν here is talking about the light, an abstract existent, and not about the Jesus, a personal being.

His Motivation

As stated, the motivation behind contriving this argument is to establish that the Logos was not a personal being, or a personality at all, before its incarnation. The statement that "the Logos was in the beginning with God" is turned to mean that "the Torah (הַתּוֹרָה) was in the beginning with God," according to the Jewish midrash. According to this midrash, the Torah (the Law later revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai) was the first of God's creations, the pattern by which he created the world. It is in this sense that πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο (John 1.2). We are meant to read the beginning of John's gospel as if it read as follows:

ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ νόμος (הַתּוֹרָה), καὶ ὁ νόμος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεῖος ἦν ὁ νόμος. ὁ νόμος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. πάντα δι᾽ τοῦ νόμου ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς τοῦ νόμου ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν.

In the beginning was the Law (the Torah), and the Law was with God, and the Law was divine [θεῖος "divine" rather than θεός "a divinity, a divine being"]. The Law was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the Law, and without the Law not one thing came into being.

The ultimate goal is to undermine the Trinitarian claim that Jesus is God, that he has always existed along with his Father and that he was a member of the so-called "Godhead" before his incarnation. Any and every argument that might prove Trinitarianism false is viable, even if the argument is unsound and invalid. In an attempt to establish his argument, the champion of the Unitarian position on CARM's language forum, known as "John Milton," first attempts to establish what the Logos was *not*. That is, if it was a *personality* (a "person" or a "being") that is called θεός which then became a human being (σάρξ), we would expect to see some continuity between the spiritual personality that existed before the incarnation and the physical human being that was Jesus of Nazareth. He cannot have that. It is against his basic assumptions, therefore there must be some other understanding of this chapter that will allow him to remain an absolute monotheist (believing in only one God without the distinction of three Persons associated with the Trinity) and also accept that this passage is inspired by God and indeed worthy of being revered as Scripture. Thus, he first says that the Logos was an abstract and not a person in any sense.

Thus, he seeks out ways to explain the passage, attempting any mental acrobatics necessary in order to achieve his goal and to "prove" that the Trinity isn't true. His ambition is not to let the text teach what it teaches and say what it says. Rather, he needs the text to read one certain way, and even it if doesn't read that way – he'll force it to. This is nothing but damaging to the text and cannot further upright investigation into the meaning of the text for the lives of Christians today. We all – even non-believers who invest their efforts into the proper understanding of the verses' meaning – must make every attempt to let the text speak for itself and to get to what it means.

Is it possible, though, that it is referring to the Law and not to a specific person? If we were discussing only verses 1 and 2, I would agree that this sounds like the Jewish story told in Midrash Rabbah, which says this:

הַתּוֹרָה אוֹמֶרֶת: אֲנִי הָיִיתִי כְּלִי אָמָּנוּתוֹ שֶׁל הקב״ה. בְּנֹוהַג שֶׁבָּעוֹלָם, מֶלֶךְ בָּשָׂר וָדָם בּוֹנֶה פָּלְטִין אֵינוֹ בּוֹנֶה אוֹתָהּ מִדַּעַת עַצְמוֹ אֶלָּא מִדַּעַת אָמָּן. וְהָאָמָּן אֵינוֹ בּוֹנֶה אוֹתָהּ מִדַּעַת עַצְמוֹ אֶלָּא דִּפְתְרָאוֹת וּפִנְקְסָאוֹת יֶשׁ לוֹ לָדַעַת הֵיאַךְ הוּא עוֹשֶׂה חֲדָרִים, הֵיאַךְ הוּא עוֹשֶׂה פִּשְׁפָּשִׁין. כָּךְ הָיָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַבִּיט בַּתּוֹרָה וּבוֹרֵא אֶת־הָעוֹלָם.

The Torah says: "I was the tool of the Holy One's artistry." As it is regularly done in the world, a flesh-and-blood king who builds a palace does not do so on his own, but with the help of an architect. Nor does the architect built it on his own, but he has scrolls and notebooks which he consults regarding how to place the rooms, where to set the entryways, etc. This is how the Holy One would look into the Torah and create the world.

Thus, we find an early Jewish tale confirming that God created the universe according to the pattern that he had created in the Torah, the first of his creations. The Torah itself was the blueprint for the creation, the rationale that holds it all together. It would be really easy to read this tale into the first two verses of John's prologue. In fact, it's quite tempting to read it this way and to completely preserve the religious background of the author, assuming that it was a Jewish follower of Jesus who wrote this book. Not only would it allow the author to be perfectly Jewish in his outlook, simply stating that Jesus was nothing more than a physical incarnation of the abstract Torah, but it would also allow our Unitarian friend (who rejects the doctrine of the Trinity) to hold much more firmly to his position.

The motivation for taking ὁ λόγος to be another way of saying ὁ νόμος (= הַתּוֹרָה) then becomes clear, and in order to maintain the position that ὁ νόμος at this point was abstract (not referring to a person but to an unwritten text) one must read αὐτόν in John 1.10 as referring not to a person (to a "him") but to a thing ("it"). Therefore, we understand the motivation of someone who would read the text this way. But, is it the right reading? Let's keep going.

Constructio ad Sensum

One interesting difference between British and American English is in how each employs the *constructio ad sensum* with collective nouns. Consider these following sentences and decide which you feel are more grammatical and which are less grammatical:

(2a)   ? My family *is* coming to visit this weekend. (American)
(2b)   ? My family *are* coming to visit this weekend. (British)
(3a)   ? The choir *performs* its songs beautifully. (American)
(3b)   ? The choir *perform* their songs beautifully. (British)
(4a)   * The police *does* its job to the best of its ability. (Ungrammatical)
(4b)   ? The police *do* their job to the best of their ability. (American and British)
(5a)   ? The police department *does* its job to the best of its ability. (American)
(5b)   ? The police department *do* their job to the best of their ability. (British?)

As far as I know, all English speakers would agree that (4a) is not grammatical. No one says "the police is" or "the police does." Everyone refers to the collective noun "police" as if it were plural: "the police do," "the police eat" and "the police are." Surprisingly, though, the other sentences, whether we are talking about variant *a* or variant *b*, separate us by region. Even when we add the word "department" to the police, it becomes less clear-cut.

Speakers of British English tend to use the plural for collective nouns. Thus, they would almost universally find (2b) and (3b) more grammatical than (2a) and (3a). However, Americans tend to use the singular to refer to collectives. Thus, Americans would think that (2a) and (3a) are more grammatical than their counterparts. What is the difference here? Americans tend to use the *grammatical* number of the noun. That is, if there are two groups of people, then one group is one group (singular) and the other group is also one group (singular). One group does this, and the other group does that. The British, however, refer to collectives as if they were plurals and use the *constructio ad sensum*, referring to the real number of people that are involved rather than to the number of groups. That is, one group of people do this, and another group of people do that. **Constructio ad sensum** is the tendency in language (in any language) to ignore grammatical gender/number when speaking about groups of people and to refer to them in their natural gender/number.

We can find examples of *constructio ad sensum* in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament. Let us look at a few.

(6)   παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον. (Philemon 10)
I urge you concerning my child, whom I fathered in my bonds, Onesimus.

In this case, the relative pronoun (ὅν) is in the masculine gender, even though the noun to which it refers is in the neuter (τὸ τέκνον). The natural gender of Paul's "child" is masculine. Therefore, the gender of the relative pronoun switched to the gender of the person that Paul was speaking of.

(7)   καὶ κρατήσας τῆς χειρὸς τοῦ παιδίου λέγει αὐτῇ· ταλιθα κουμ, ὅ ἐστιν μεθερμηνευόμενον· τὸ κοράσιον, σοὶ λέγω, ἔγειρε. (Mark 5.41)
And taking hold of the hand of the little child, he says to her: 'Talitha koum,' which is translated: 'Little girl, I tell you, get up.'

In this verse an instance of *constructio ad sensum* appears, in which the word used to say "little child" is neuter (τὸ παιδίον), but Jesus was talking to a girl. The gender of the girl appears in the pronoun ("to her" αὐτῇ) and overrides the grammatical gender of the noun used to refer to her.

(8)   הָעָם הַהֹלְכִים בַּחֹשֶׁךְ רָאוּ אוֹר גָּדוֹל יֹשְׁבֵי בְּאֶרֶץ צַלְמָוֶת אוֹר נָגַהּ עֲלֵיהֶם: (Isaiah 9.1)
The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those dwelling in the land of death's shadow light has arisen.

In this Hebrew verse, the word people (הָעָם) is a collective noun (similar to Greek λαός, referring to a people group rather than to individuals). However, by *constructio ad sensum*, the participle that comes with it (הַהֹלְכִים) is in the plural. This doesn't always happen. We might expect at one point to see הָעָם הַהֹלֵךְ and at another point to see הָעָם הַהֹלְכִים, as we see both in Joshua 5.4 and 5.5 the two possible variations of *the people who go out* – both כָּל־הָעָם הַיֹּצֵא and כָל־הָעָם הַיֹּצְאִים. There is no necessity to use *constructio ad sensum*. Sometimes we find it; sometimes we don't. John Milton, however, has argued that we should *expect* to find the *constructio ad sensum* in John's prologue, as if it would be required if he were writing from a certain perspective. The construction is never used *of necessity,* but only *by convention.*

But our question would be whether we find a true instance of *constructio ad sensum* in John 1.10 and the verses that follow it. Here is the text again:

> ⁹ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. ¹⁰ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω.

If the text were limited to these two verse, we would indeed be under obligation to say that αὐτόν is in the masculine as the result of *constructio ad sensum* and that its antecedent is τὸ φῶς. If the text were thus limited, it would certainly be true, but it is not limited to these two verses.

In fact, this is not an instance of *constructio ad sensum* at all. Rather, this is simply an instance of a regular *cataphor,* which I will discuss just below, and afterwards I will show how the fact that a person (Jesus) was in the writer's mind the entire time is revealed in four other pieces of the puzzle of the prologue to the Gospel of John.

Anaphors vs. Cataphors in Syntax

We get the word *syntax* from the Greek σύνταξις, meaning "coordination." It is related to the way that a military leader would *draw up* (τάσσω) his army *together* (σύν). We use the word **syntax** to refer to the way that words are lined up in a sentence to create relationships between them and to reflect meaning (semantics). When we talk about **anaphors**, we are mostly referring to pronouns (whether relative, personal or demonstrative pronouns) that cause the reader to look further up the sentence, paragraph or page to see who is being referred to. If you hear the following without any context, you will be lost.

(6)   She wants to tell him what happened.

You're simply lost not knowing who "she" is or who the "him" is that she wants to tell something to. In order for the sentence to have meaning, you must have a reference point somewhere else in the conversation. Thus, the following would clear up the confusion.

(7a)   Susan is looking for Jack. She wants to tell him what happened.

This sentence is absolutely clear with no room for mistake, since Susan is feminine and corresponds to "she" in the second sentence, while Jack is masculine and corresponds to "him." But, what if there were two females in the sentence?

(7b)   Susan is looking for Joanne. She wants to tell her what happened.

In this case, there might be some confusion with regard to who "she" and "her" is in the second sentence. Most of us would agree that since Susan is doing the searching, it is also she who will do the telling. We can index the sentence to show visually that this is the way in which we understand it.

(7c)   Susan$_i$ is looking for Joanne$_j$. She$_i$ wants to tell her$_j$ what happened.

In this case, the person marked with $_i$ is Susan and the pronoun that corresponds to Susan is also marked with an $_i$. The same is true for Joanne, who is marked with a $_j$. Marking the various participants in a text to point out how they relate to their anaphors is known as **indexing**. The rest of the sentences in this section will be indexed for different meanings.

Look at the difference between these two sentences:

(8a)   If you see John$_i$, please tell him$_i$ that I'm looking for him$_i$.
(8b)   If you see him$_i$, please tell John$_i$ than I'm looking for him$_i$.

With the index, we can see that the sentences mean the same thing. Both are giving instructions to tell John that the speaker is looking for John. So, what is the difference? In (8a) the person being spoken about is identified before the pronouns. Both pronouns, then, have *John* as their **antecedent**, which is the referent of a pronoun that appears *before* it in the text. The pronoun that refers to a word already mentioned is called an **anaphor**. However, in (8b) the person being spoken about is referred to with a pronoun before it is mentioned by name. In this case, *John* becomes the **postcedent** of the first pronoun (while remaining the antecedent of the second) since John appears *after* the first instance of the pronoun. The pronoun that refers to a person or thing that hasn't been mentioned yet is called a **cataphor**.

What we have in John 1.10-12 is the cataphoric use of the personal pronoun to refer to the person that had not yet been mentioned by name – Jesus Christ, who is first named in verse 17. Now that we have covered anaphors, cataphors and *constructio ad sensum*, we are ready to get into my refutation of the argument.

A Look at the Prologue of John's Gospel

This gospel begins with probably the most controversial verse in the debate between Trinitarians and Unitarians. It reads this way in Greek:

ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

Both sides have used this verse to their advantage – the one arguing that it says that the Logos was God, the other saying that the word θεός in this context means something less than full-blown deity. If we were left to this verse alone, I would side completely with John Milton in his view of this verse. In fact, in the overall argument regarding this chapter, I think I would take his side if he were not so adamant in his positions even when he are arguing for things that are obviously mistaken (as in the case of the Logos being non-personal in this section). Many things are called θεός in Greek. We have gods on every level, from minor household gods to the most power of the beings thought to live in the skies. Yet, a book – written or otherwise – cannot be called θεός except as a metaphor (in the same way that the stomach is called a "god" in Paul's writings). It might be called θεῖος "divine," in the sense that it issues forth from God, but it will not itself be classed as a deity.

Even according to the Watchtower's *New World Translation*, which John Milton generally supports as a better translation than the average Evangelical publication, the Logos is called "a god" in John 1.1. Who can think of a god that does not have a mind, that does not have a will, that is non-personal? Such a thing is certainly not a deity – and to remove mind from the pre-incarnate Logos is to remove anything that might qualify it for the title θεός. If the Logos did not have a personality, it was not a deity. Plane and simple. As per my own personal understanding of the text, I have no doubt that the writer was coming up with something new. He was not saying that the Logos was God (Yahweh יְהוֶה). He was saying that the Logos was a divine being, a deity. There were many things that were deities to the Greeks, as I said. But, the Jews were another matter entirely. They only believed in one god – at least that is what we are led to believe.

At least since the return from Babylon, the Jewish people have been monotheist as monotheist can be. So, how could a believing Jew – whether he was a follower of Jesus or not – make the statement that anything or anyone besides Yahweh was a deity? Herein lay my quandary for a long time, but I think I have come to a resolution of the issue with the help of Dr. Richard Carrier. Before I go into that, however, I would like to take a look at the parts of the prologue that indicate to me in vivid fashion that the author envisioned Jesus as having a sentient existence prior to his incarnation – that the Logos was indeed a *person* and not just an abstract such as we see of the Torah in the Jewish midrashic tales. In those tales we are told that the primeval Torah was as "black fire written on white fire." It was a text that emanated light, but it was not a living creature. It was a blueprint for the construction of the universe, but it was not a deity. So, what gives me the impression from the prologue of the Gospel of John that the author imagined a personality rather than an abstract? Here are four points that I draw from the text that illustrate this to me:

1. The word οὗτος in 1.3 (οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν) is most regularly used of a person in a construction like this. In fact, the prologue uses οὗτος (and also ἐκεῖνος) in just such a way, to refer to a person. In 1.7 we see οὗτος (ὁ Ἰωάννης) ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν *he (John) came as a testimony*, and in 1.8 we see οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς *he was not the light*. Since the author felt it necessary to point out that John was not the light being discussed, it's clear that *someone* was indeed the light – someone that

he wanted to tell us about. By adding the comment about John coming to bring people to that light, he adds even more to the suspense that he is trying to build up before he reveals the name of the person that is "the light" and "the Logos." If the author had intended for us to imagine an abstract non-person as "the light," there would have been no need to clarify the fact that John was not the light.

2. Not only did he tell us that John wasn't the light – and imply that someone else was – but he even tells us that the light was on its way into the world (by the use of the periphrastic ἦν ἐρχόμενον – implying that it was always "to come" and was intended to be sent into the world even from the beginning) and that it actually was in the world. The subject of 1.9 (ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν... ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον) is clearly "the light," but if we were to continue with it into the next verse, then we have a problem – the problem discussed regarding the *constructio ad sensum*. Light has no natural gender. It is not masculine or feminine in reality. Grammatically, it could be referred to by any gender (in Greek, τὸ φῶς is neuter; in Hebrew, הָאוֹר is masculine; in Spanish, *la luz* is feminine). Thus, it is nonsensical for *natural gender* to come into play at all here! That is, unless we are talking about a *person*. The pronoun αὐτόν in 1.9-12 in the masculine gender is a cataphor referring to the postcedent Ἰησοῦς Χριστός of verse 17 – the verse in which the great reveal is made. Essentially, the text literally and clearly says: *the light... came into the world, and the world did not recognize him*. The "him" in question is Jesus, who even confirmed this when he said while on earth: ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου *I am the light of the world* (John 8.12).

3. In 1.3 we read about the Logos that πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο *all things came into existence through him/it*. The gender of αὐτοῦ here is ambiguous, since the masculine and neuter forms are the same in the genitive case. However, in 1.10 the gender is unambiguous because of the appearance of the masculine form in the last phrase: ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. Notice that the "came into existence" phrase is here repeated, using ὁ κόσμος (the world, universe) instead of πάντα (all things), with the same meaning. We must take αὐτοῦ in the middle of the verse to refer to the same thing as αὐτόν in the end – which means that the gender must be considered masculine. We're talking about a *person* that was the means through which everything came into existence.

4. When Greek says that someone comes εἰς τὰ ἴδια, it means "to his own things" or "to his home" (where his personal effects are kept). The world belonged to him, since it came into existence through him and would have had no existence without him, yet the world did not recognize him. Only to those who recognized him would he give the right to become sons of God. It makes no sense for an impersonal force or concept to "come to that which is his own" or "come to his own house," yet we are told of "the Logos" or "the light" that he εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν. This must be a person of some kind.

Just after the verse in question we are told clearly that the Logos became a human being: καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο. We know that while Jesus lived on earth (assuming that he existed), he was a living person. The question has been whether or not he was a living person in a spiritual sense *before* the incarnation – at least according to the prologue of the Gospel of John. At this point, I do not think that we can reasonably doubt that the author imagined the Logos as a living being or a person of some kind, possessed of a mind, a personality and a will. It was not just an abstract. It is not a simple reference to the primordial Torah. But, if that is not the case, then how did the author conceptualize the Logos as it existed before coming to earth in the man called Jesus of Nazareth?

A Commentary on the Prologue's Syntax

I know that it might seem a little odd, but I think it might be beneficial to go *backwards* through the prologue of John. Quoting from Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th edition), I will go from verse 18 of John's prologue and work back to the beginning. Once I finish this discussion, I will explain the logic behind this method.

> John 1.14-18 – Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ,
> δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ
> καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων· οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον· ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι
> πρῶτός μου ἦν. ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος·
> ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο. Θεὸν οὐδεὶς
> ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.

The Logos became flesh and lived among men. He joined the ranks of humanity, becoming a human being just like everyone else. We do not find the name of the Logos-as-man until verse 17 – Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. This is the big reveal of the entire passage. After all of the suspense created throughout the prologue, we finally arrive at the unveiling of the person that has been in discussion all along, the pivotal message of John's gospel – that truth came through Jesus Christ. Later in his gospel, he will tell us that Jesus claimed to be the truth (14.6) and that he was aware that he had been with God before the world even came into existence (17.5). We must be careful to notice that Jesus never claimed to be God. He claimed to be God's son. That is an important distinction.

John's testimony seems to interrupt this passage. It would have been natural for "full of grace and truth" to be followed immediately by "since out of his goodness we all have also received grace upon grace" and then a mention of the law (with Moses) and grace and truth (with Jesus). Why did this verse about John's testimony interfere and disrupt the passage? It's hard to know where the author ends quoting the words of John the Baptist. Could the "out of his fullness" section actually be John the Baptist's words and not those of the narrator? Could John the Baptist be the one telling us that we have all received grace upon grace from the fullness of the Logos and that the Logos was the one who was here revealing the truth to mankind – that is, Jesus Christ? I'm not really sure. The word ὅτι in that sentence could be introducing a secondary speech sequence.

Either way, we are told that he was before John the Baptist, meaning that even though he was born *after* John, he existed *before* him. And out of his fullness, we are told, all men have received grace again and again, even if they didn't deserve it. The author will later tell us that this is because of God's love – that he loved the world so much that he sent his only son, that whoever trusts in him will have life (3.16). But, who was this "son" before he came to earth? Was he big-G God, or was he something less than "the Eternal One"?

By saying that ἡ ἀθήθεια came through Jesus, was the author saying that the law was not true? By saying that ἡ χάρις came through Jesus, was he saying that the law was not itself given as an act of grace? What of the fact that Yahweh is said to have told the Israelites regarding himself:

Exodus 20.6:
וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לַאֲלָפִים לְאֹהֲבַי וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתָי׃
καὶ ποιῶν ἔλεος εἰς χιλιάδας τοῖς ἀγαπῶσίν με καὶ τοῖς φυλάσσουσιν τὰ προστάγματά μου.

Is "showing mercy" (ποιῶν ἔλεος) not the same as "showing grace" (עֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד)? God declared here that he would show mercy (grace) to those who keep the commandments of the Torah. It seems that "grace upon grace" (χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος = חֶסֶד עַל חֶסֶד) refers to the extension of grace through the giving of the Torah and the full measure of grace given through the sacrifice of Jesus. The author connects these things as all coming "out of his fullness."

Who gave the Torah, though? The Torah, as we are told by both Paul and Luke, was put into effect by angels (Acts 7.53; Galatians 3.19). In fact, even in the Torah it specifically says that it was מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה "the angel of Yahweh" (ἄγγελος Κυρίου) that appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3.2) and called him to go redeem the Israelites. It was the angel of Yahweh that led the people into the promised land (Exodus 23.20-23), while other texts clearly say that God himself led the people and brought them into the land. God says in the Ten Commandments: "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20.2). Yet, in Judges 2.1 we see the angel of Yahweh use the same terminology: "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore unto your fathers." Was it God who brought the people out of Egypt or the angel? This ambiguity is throughout the story of God's interaction with Israel.

The angel of Yahweh at several points simply identifies himself as Yahweh through close association to God. It is surely this angel that is unique among the servants of God. It is this angel that itself is "in the bosom of the father" and can be called God's "son." If all of the angels are "divine beings" (θεοί), then it would certainly be appropriate to call the one most special angel who bore God's name within himself a "divine being" (θεός). God himself, we are told in verse 18, has never been seen by a human eye, but it is "the unique divine one" (ὁ μονογενὴς θεός) that has declared God. How has he explained or declared God? Well, he is the one who appeared to Abraham, to Moses, to Isaiah and to all the rest of the prophets. Any time that there was an appearance of God, it was not really God – since no man has ever seen God (θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε). John states this very clearly in chapter 12 of his gospel. When speaking about the appearance of Yahweh's glory in Isaiah 6 ("I saw Yahweh, high and exalted, seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple"), we are actually told that Isaiah was seeing the glory of Jesus! How can this be explained except when we realize that the angel of Yahweh was the one that appeared to men as a

way of "explaining" who Yahweh was – either by revelation through speech or through visual phenomena. Indeed, if no one had ever seen God, then it must have been the angel of God that appeared to Isaiah – and that angel of God, which bears God's very glory, was the Logos, the "true light that gives light to every man."

By calling Jesus ὁ μονογενὴς θεός and in saying that θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος, John was not saying that Jesus was Yahweh so much as that he was the angel of Yahweh, which bears God's name and speaks for him, revealing his character and will.

> John 1.9-13 – Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ᾽ ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.

Here is where the Logos is called "the true light," probably a reference to the fact that he bears the glory of Yahweh. The fact that he "enlightens every man" (φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον) is another reference to him bringing truth – that men know God and know truth by his light. This "true light" was coming into the world, probably referring to the fact that he was ordained to come into the world from the creation. This might explain why we read ἦν... ἐρχόμενον as a periphrastic verbal expression, rather than simply ἤρχετο ("he/it was coming") in the imperfect.

Here we see also the appearance of the claim that the world or universe (ὁ κόσμος = πάντα) came into existence through the Logos or the "true light," which by now should be understood to be Jesus. We are told in the verses that we already covered that John gave testimony about Jesus, and in the verses before the current segment we see that it was concerning "the light" that John gave testimony. Jesus is the light. We should not understand "the light" as a simple reference to light (φῶς) or glory (δόξα), but to a person. We know this because John specifically pointed out that John the Baptist *wasn't* the light that he was talking about – it was someone else!

Given that the angel of Yahweh led the people out of slavery in Egypt to be his own people, in a very literal sense, he came to his own possessions and his own people – who did not recognize him. But, whoever would accept his offer of redemption would be given the power to become children of God, born of God.

> John 1.6-8 – Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης· οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι᾽ αὐτοῦ. οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ᾽ ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός.

This segment says that John came to give testimony concerning the light (περὶ τοῦ φωτός), whereas 1.15 says that he gave testimony concerning Jesus (περὶ αὐτοῦ). Again, Jesus is the light. That is the message we are supposed to be getting here. The fact that he points out that John was not the light, as mentioned, is a good indication that the author intended his audience to understand that he was talking about a person

coming into the world and being the light that he was talking about. This should make it very clear that "the true light" was a personality, a mind, a being of some kind. It would seem to be most consistent to associate this light with the angel of Yahweh from the Torah, as has already been attempted above.

> John 1.1-5 – Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν. ὃ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

We now arrive at the beginning of the prologue. We have already dealt with the fact that the Logos became flesh, that before its incarnation (becoming flesh) it was a divine being that revealed the character and will of God, that John came to give testimony concerning this person in order to bring people to faith in him, that the world was created through this being, etc. All of it comes together now in the first five verses, where we are told that the Logos existed in the beginning with God. Does this mean that it's eternal? No. But, it was there when the world was created – probably as the first of God's creations. "The beginning" (ἡ ἀρχή) here probably refers to the beginning of the world, not eternity past. In πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, we are reminded of ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο from 1.10. Here it means that the universe was created through the Logos, there it means that it was created through "the true light" – both mean the same thing. The world was created through the one that was in God's bosom and revealed him – the very one who gave the Torah, the very one who brought the children of Israel out of slavery, the very one who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. God was the creator, the redeemer, the father of all; and the angel of God's presence was the one who carried out his will. He is the one who literally did the creating, the redeeming and the nurturing.

The text may not be a bastion for Trinitarianism, but it certainly holds to a high Christology. The author may not have viewed Jesus as being the Eternal God, but he is as close to being such as any other creature on earth might lay claim to being. The Logos was the revelation of God's character, his power, his mercy and his faithfulness. In all things, it (he) did the will of God to carry it out in the physical realm. So, what can we take away from this?

Conclusion

The being known as the Logos (ὁ λόγος) to Greek-speaking Christians and Jews was called מֵימְרָא *memra* in Aramaic. It was common even in Judaism to call the angel of Yahweh (מַלְאַךְ יְהֹוֶה) by this name. It would seem that this was a direct conceptual carry-over into the Gospel of John, which would transform the concept of this distant being, who bears the very character of God, into a human being that could be touched, seen and heard – and that could offer itself as a sacrificial atonement for the sins of the world. It was one thing for the angel of Yahweh to interact with the Jewish people and to lead them on a track to redemption, bringing them out of Egypt, giving them the Torah, defending them in battle, etc. It was quite another for this great leader of the people to become one of them.

Perhaps the early Christians had a better grasp of Judaism than today's Jews care to admit. Perhaps it really did make sense for them to imagine the Logos taking the greatest possible step to bring about mankind's redemption. Sure, Christians generally do not understand the practices of Jews that have been passed down from the times of the Pharisees and encapsulated in the Talmud, but there seems to be a part of the Jewish philosophy that has been crystalized within Christianity and preserved. This preserved aspect of Jewish thought makes its appearance here in John's prologue, but it is generally misunderstood both by Trinitarians and by Unitarians – at least, those with whom I've come into contact. Trinitarians want θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος to mean that the Logos was God himself. And Unitarians, at least the one with whom I've had the most heated contact in debate, seem to want to remove all personality and life from the Logos previous to its being planted in the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

The gender of αὐτόν in John 1.10 is purposefully masculine. It is a cataphor (pronoun with a postcedent rather than an antecedent) for Jesus Christ, who appears later in the text. We are led from the very beginning to look for a *person*, since no non-being can be called θεός in Greek except in a metaphor. The entire point of the prologue is to bring us into connection with the fact that the Logos was there from the beginning orchestrating the will of God, and that it was he who would make God known ultimately – especially God's grace, in the sacrifice of his own son. It would be absurd to think that the Logos is simply another way of referring to the Torah, which has no mind of its own. This is not what we see in the deeds performed by the angel of Yahweh in the Torah, nor is it what we see in the Logos – which was a divine being (θεός) that became human (σάρξ) in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.