



# THE BEREIA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## Utilizing “the Word” — Then and Now

David Anguish

We readily confess it, but do we understand it? I refer to John’s affirmation: “In the beginning was the Word [*λόγος*, *logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1.1–2, 14a).

Because John’s reference to the *logos* was useful for connecting with the larger thought world of his time, it is instructive for connecting with our world. But we must understand the *logos* first, something George R. Beasley-Murray stresses is not a given. As he writes at the beginning of his discussion of the theme, “the word made flesh,”

For modern Western man, who has lost the key to the idiom of the Word, the Prologue to the fourth Gospel is an enigma. People of the nearer Orient and those of the Mediterranean area, who first contemplated this composition, will have been fascinated by it, and would have been lured to read further about this unheard-of news of the Word *made* flesh” (Beasley-Murray 1989, 19).

F. F. Bruce also notes the challenge for understanding that the idea of the *logos* poses for modern readers:

No doubt the English term ‘Word’ is an inadequate rendering of the Greek *logos*, but it would be difficult to find one less inadequate. In a version or commentary intended for scholars, it might suffice to retain *logos* untranslated, but it will not really do to retain it in a work intended for the general reader, like James Moffatt’s translation. Moffatt’s translation of the Gospel begins with the statement, ‘The Logos existed in the very beginning,’ and this is justified by the observation that “‘Logos’ is at any rate less misleading than the ‘Word’ would be to the modern reader.’ But if *logos* is not completely meaningless to an ordinary reader, it probably suggests something like ‘reason’, and that is more misleading than ‘Word.’ A ‘word’ is a means of communication, the expression of what is in one’s mind (Bruce 1983, 29).

In Bruce’s view, J. B. Phillips’s translation is better. He “renders the clause ‘At the beginning God expressed himself’” and seeks to “safeguard the personal quality which the Evangelist assigns to the divine self-expression by continuing, ‘That personal expression, that word, was with God . . .’” Citing Phillip’s collaboration with E. V. Rieu in *The Bible Translator* (1955, 157f.), Bruce reports that “Phillips agrees that his rendering is not one hundred per cent accurate, but says that a number of his readers have told him that it does convey some positive meaning to them, whereas they find the rendering ‘word’ (whether capitalized or not) too ambiguous.” (Bruce 1983, 29).

To better understand the effectiveness of John’s use of *logos*, we begin with Beasley-Murray’s statement that “there can be no doubt that the *entire* description of verses 1–13 [John 1] would have made perfect sense to non-Christian people of all nationalities who knew about the Word” (Beasley-Murray 1989, 26). Indeed, “affirmations about the Word of God had been at home in

the ancient world for a millennium or more” (Beasley-Murray 1989, 22). This was true not only among the Jews, for whom “the association was inevitable,” but also for their neighbors, including the Assyrians and Babylonians whose hymns about the *logos* viewed the Word “as a quasi-physical power of cosmic proportions” that was “unfathomable and incomprehensible, closed up, mysterious’.” Evidence of the idea of the creative Word is also found in Egypt, the Ugaritic Ras Shamra texts, and later Jewish wisdom literature. The concept also passed from the near East into Greek and Roman thought, as evidenced in Heraclitus, the Stoics, and the Platonists, the latter noted by Augustine in his *Confessions* (Beasley-Murray 1989, 22–24).

Perhaps most famously, in his effort “to mediate the Jewish faith to the literary world of his day,” Philo, the Jewish writer of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–50 AD), “wrote much about the Word.” Beasley-Murray summarizes Philo’s emphasis as follows:

He spoke of the Word as the agent of creation and the medium of God’s government of the world. It is the Mediator, the High Priest through whom the world comes to God, and even the Advocate (Paraclete) for the forgiveness of sins. He stated that for the mass of people God is unknowable, but the ordinary folk can know him in and through the Word. The Word is the perfect Man, the Man of Genesis 1, made in the image of God, as distinct from the man of Genesis 2, made of the dust of the earth. He is the Father’s “eldest Son,” his “First-born” (Beasley-Murray 1989, 24).

No basis exists for saying that Philo’s writings influenced, or were even known by, the writer of the fourth gospel. But their existence alongside that writing provides additional evidence that the *logos* was a concept that was known across the ancient world and that, in broad terms at least, the understanding of that concept was consistent in many cultures, in both the East and West (but see Carson 1991, 113–117, who highlights several specific differences in understanding from group to group). The concept was thus a useful gateway for John to introduce the genuine Word who gives light to everyone in the world (cf. John 1.9).

Might the concept serve a similar purpose today? For it to do so, we will need to overcome the challenges to understanding highlighted by Beasley-Murray and Bruce. We will also need to identify broad areas of thought we have in common with both the people we know and cultures beyond ours. And finally, we will need to determine exactly how John’s presentation of the “Word” responded to the needs of his world and how we can utilize what he employed to speak more clearly to ours.

Given our calling, we will be wise to pursue these questions.

### Works Cited

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