

The following summarizes the Greek word Logos and the Greek conceptions accompanying it. Logos had a long and complex history before John connected it to Jesus in the opening of his Gospel. I intend to provide a short review of numerous Bible dictionary entries on Logos to help you understand how this word was used in the first century. I consulted the following Bible dictionaries:

- *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*
- *Anchor-Yale Bible Dictionary (ABD)*
- *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*
- *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*
- *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)*

Take your time to contemplate the Greek idea behind Logos. God will help by revealing the finer nuances to you over time. My prayer is the following will enrich your Bible study.

Introduction:

"*In the beginning was the Word.*" This [opening](#) to John's Gospel may sound familiar to many Christians, perhaps to the point of losing its unique impact. For those outside Christianity, the concept of Jesus as the "Word" might be perplexing.

What, then, was this "Word" present at the beginning? John chose to use the Greek word *Logos*, generally translated into English as "Word." But what did the Greek word *Logos* mean to his first-century readers? Is it possible that a more profound concept exists behind the Greek *Logos* than is understood in modern English?

There is no equivalent word in English for the Greek word *Logos*. The best we can do as modern readers is to look at the clusters of English words, which correspond to how *Logos* was used throughout ancient Greek literature, philosophical writings, and even into the New Testament. Although the meaning of *Logos* has evolved, we can grasp the rich concepts underlying this key Greek term by considering the clusters of associated English words.

Conceptual Word Studies:

When studying the Bible, given that it involves two ancient languages—Hebrew and Greek—it is often crucial to engage in *conceptual* word studies instead of seeking direct, one-for-one definitions. Ancient languages had considerably fewer words than modern English, giving each ancient word a significantly broader semantic range, encompassing a wide array of possible meanings. Conceptual word studies look to the word root, often a verb, and the list of nouns created from that verb to understand the more profound conceptions behind the original word. This will be the case when studying the concept behind the Greek word *logos*.

Historical Greek Usage:

The Greek word *logos* has a long usage history, dating back to Classical Greek writing such as Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), the root verb of *logos* initially meant "to gather."¹ Within the process of "gathering," we find the concepts of discernment, judgment, separating, and repetition. If you are told to gather strawberries from a field, you must be able to discern the berries from their leaves, judge a ripe berry from the unripe, and repeat this process over and over again until you have "gathered." In this case, we can see that the root verb for *logos* – *leg-* includes all of these actions encapsulated into one English word: to gather.

From "gather," the usage is expanded to

- counting – "the material or mental gathering one after the other of similar things."²
- enumerating – "to recall from memory things of the same kind with a view to impartation."³
- As well as narration – "the complete enumeration of things or events of the same kind became the narration, depiction or recounting of various matters."⁴
- From 'narration,' it is only a tiny step further to become "speaking" or "saying."

¹ Gottlob Schrenk et al., "[Λέγω, Λόγος, Ῥῆμα, Λαλέω, Λόγισ, Λόγιον, ἄλογος, Λογικός, Λογομαχέω, Λογομαχία, Εκλέγομαι, Ἐκλογή, Ἐκλεκτός.](#)" ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 71.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

From the verb root – to gather, count, enumerate, narrate, or speak – clusters of nouns emerge.

- On the side of gather/count is found "calculation, reckoning, measure, ratio, account, and proportion." See [Matthew 18:23](#), which uses *logos* to refer to "accounts."
- From narrate/speak/say, come "speech, saying, or **word**."⁵

All of these basic usages are [found throughout](#) the New Testament.

Profound Connections:

As often is the case with ancient languages, these underlying concepts are profoundly connected. For example, the Greek *logos* includes the human ability to reason and create an *explanation* (a form of *calculation*) by carefully *measuring* or *gathering* our words. When reasoning through a problem, we *measure* our thoughts, *discern* our ideas, and *separate* them from one another.

Another example of the word *Logos* is that it is used for the English concept of ratio. According to Etymoline, an online etymology dictionary, the English word "ratio" has synonyms like:

"reason, rationale," from Latin *ratio* "a reckoning, account, a numbering, calculation," ...also in a transferred sense, of mental action, "reason, reasoning, judgment, understanding, that faculty of the mind which forms the basis of computation and calculation."⁶

All of these words associated with ratio are also associated with *logos*. To the Greek mind, to think rationally is a function of the *logos*, which resides within a human being.

⁵ Thomas H. Tobin, "*Logos*" in The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, Vol. 4, pp. (348-356).

⁶ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=ratio>

The Greek Philosophers and the Cosmos:

Eventually, the Greek word *logos* enters the realm of the philosophers and is used as the mind or reason that orders the entire cosmos. We begin with the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who, interestingly enough, hailed from the Greek city of Ephesus.⁷

1. **Heraclitus** (circa 535–475 BCE): The *logos* was a fundamental principle of order and knowledge. He viewed it as the underlying logic or reason that governs the universe. Heraclitus famously asserted that all things happen according to this *logos*, though humans often live in ways that do not follow it. His notion of *logos* implies a sort of universal law that connects and permeates everything.

Heraclitus's use of *Logos* in this manner may feel alien to our modern English "word," which is generally only used as a noun rather than an entire concept of rationality or the rationality of the cosmos.

Fast forward a few hundred years to the Stoics, and the *Logos* again attains a cosmic level.⁸

2. **Stoic Philosophers** (3rd Century BCE onwards): The Stoics further developed the concept of *logos*, integrating it into their philosophy as a central tenet. To the Stoics, *logos* was the divine animating principle pervading the cosmos and would be the equivalent of our conceptions of God. They believed it was a rational and active principle that created and sustained the universe. In Stoic thought, *logos* also pertains to human reason; thus, to live in accordance with *logos* is to lead a life of virtue and reasoned harmony with the natural world.⁹

As we can see, Greek philosophers attempted to understand the nature of reality, intuiting something somewhat similar to, yet distinctly different from, the God of the Bible.

Although lacking the covenantal background, Special Revelation, and precise language about the God of the Old Testament, through General Revelation, they concluded that a force indeed existed within the cosmos that governed human lives in many ways.¹⁰

Stoicism pursued *virtue* as a path to a *well-lived life*, while Judaism and Christianity sought *holiness* and the manifestation of *God's kingdom* through a covenantal relationship with the Creator. (Consider Paul's words in [Romans 2:14-16](#)).

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heraclitus>

⁸ Tobin, "Logos," ABD, Vol. (4), 348-49.

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoicism>

¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed., pp. 121-167. See the discussion of each General Revelation vs. Special or Particular Revelation.

Ancient Conception of the Cosmos:

As a general rule, those in the ancient world saw things on earth as a reflection of the greater heavenly reality of the cosmos. For example, in the book of [Exodus \(25:40\)](#), Moses is "shown" a copy of the Tabernacle that exists in the heavens and is then instructed by God to recreate it on earth for his presence to dwell (see also [Hebrews 8:5](#)). Therefore, if the human mind can reason, calculate, and judge by use of the human *logos* here on earth, then there must be a more excellent corresponding *logos* in the heavens that has the same function over the entire cosmos.

John's Use of *Logos*:

When John begins his Gospel with the Greek word *Logos*, all of the cosmic concepts of reason, ordering, and the active principle of the universe are considered. Thus, for John's first-century audience, familiar with these philosophical connotations, applying "*logos*" to describe Jesus of Nazareth would have been both revolutionary and deeply resonant. It presented Jesus as the divine reason or principle incarnate, intimately involved in the creation and continuous ordering of the universe. This portrayal would align Jesus with a critical element of the universe essential for understanding the cosmos and human existence.

John's Hebrew Background:

It's important to remember that while the Gospel of John is written in Greek, the perspective of its author—John, the disciple and apostle—is profoundly Jewish. John is steeped in the Jewish scriptures, the Jewish understanding of the cosmos, and he sees Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. John is aware of the Greek conceptions behind the word *logos*, but he perceives the true nature of Jesus through the lens of the Hebrew scriptures.

It's crucial for us to recognize that scholars today view John's interpretation of Jesus as the "Word" through the Aramaic translations of these scriptures, known as the Targum.¹¹ In the coming weeks, we will explore the intersection of the Hebrew word for "word" – *dabar*, the Hebrew traditions surrounding Wisdom, the Aramaic Targums and the use of the Aramaic word for "word" – *memra*, and the Greek philosophical usage of the word *Logos*.

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targum>