

## Discovering Jesus Course

## 120

## The Memra Incarnate

In the last lesson, we gained explored John's use of the title *Logos* for Christ. We saw that John described Jesus as the divine agency who was "with God" in the beginning and who "was God," and he did so in terms immediately understandable to his Greek audience, drawing on a concept originated by Philo.

**Read again John 1:1-4,14**

But there is a strong possibility that John's choice of the word *logos* was not sourced solely from Philo's writings. Even within Hebrew thought, there is a correspondence to the concept of the *Logos* used by both Philo and John. In the Palestinian Targums (which were Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Old Testament), the Aramaic word *Memra* (or "the Word") is frequently used as a substitute for the name of God. Kauffman Kohler explains:

"In the Targum the *Memra* figures constantly as the manifestation of the divine power, or as God's messenger in place of God Himself, wherever the predicate is not in conformity with the dignity or the spirituality of the Deity."<sup>1</sup>

Increasingly within Jewish thinking, God was seen as so holy and separate from mankind that he used personified attributes as his intermediaries when dealing with man. Thus it was the *Memra* ("the Word") who created the world and it was the *Memra* ("the Word") who communicated with fallen man. The *Memra* was seen as the same as God, yet also distinct from God — an divine agency who fulfilled five primary capacities:

- **The *Memra* is the Agent of Creation** – In the Targum's paraphrase of **Isaiah 48:13**, it is the *Memra* who "laid the foundation of the earth." We find this concept paralleled in John's writings: "Through [the *Logos*] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made...[The *Logos*] was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him" (**John 1:3,10**).
- **The *Memra* is the Agent of Judgment** – In the Targum's paraphrase of **Genesis 3:8**, it is the *Memra* that goes looking for wayward Adam and Eve. In **Deuteronomy 9:3**, it is the *Memra* who is the "consuming fire." In **2 Samuel 6:7**, it is the *Memra* who strikes down Uzzah. And in **Isaiah 30:27**, it is the

*Memra* who is the agent of God's holy wrath. We find a striking parallel in the words of Jesus himself: "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son" (**John 5:22**).

- **The *Memra* is the Agent of Salvation** – In the Targum's paraphrase of **Deuteronomy 1:30**, it is the *Memra* who fights on Israel's behalf. In **Exodus 33:22**, it is the *Memra* who shelters Moses from the fatal brilliance of God's glory. And in **Isaiah 45:25**, it is through the *Memra* that the descendants of Israel will be justified. This is reflected in Jesus' very name, which in Hebrew is *Yeshua*, meaning "God Saves"\* (see **Matthew 1:21**).
- **The *Memra* is the Agent of Revelation** – In the Targum's paraphrase of **Exodus 19:17**, Moses meets with the *Memra*. In **Deuteronomy 4:33,36**, it is the *Memra* who speaks out of the fire to the people. And in **Isaiah 6:8**, it is the *Memra* who reveals himself to Isaiah and commissions him to prophesy to Israel. It is not coincidental that John's *Logos* also has this function, as we see in **John 1:18** (NLT): "No one has ever seen God. But [the *Logos*], who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart; he has told us about him."
- **The *Memra* is the Agent of Covenant** – In the Targum's paraphrase of **Exodus 25:22**, it is the *Memra* which meets with the High Priest over the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. In **Genesis 15:1**, it is the *Memra* who becomes Abraham's shield, in fulfillment of God's covenant with him. In **Leviticus 26:9**, it is the *Memra* who enacts the Sinai Covenant. In **Jeremiah 31:1**, which introduces the coming new covenant, it is the *Memra* who is the agent of that new covenant. And as we saw in **Lesson 118**, Jesus' primary mission, for which he came into the world, was to inaugurate the new covenant of **Jeremiah 31:31-34**.

Although the written Targums postdate Philo's writings by two or three centuries, they provide a window into a rich tradition which most likely dates back before the time of Christ. In fact, there is a strong possibility that the Palestinian Jewish use of the term *Memra* provided the Hebraic foundation for Philo to build a bridge to Greek philosophy, through a mutually recognizable Greek concept – the *Logos*.

You can immediately see how the followers of Jesus saw in the twin concept of *Memra/Logos* a powerful tool to explain how their Messiah could be both human and divine. Together with a parallel development in Jewish theology, which held the Spirit of God (*Ruach Ha'Kodesh*, or the Holy Spirit) also to be a divine agency similar to the *Memra*, in being both *with* God and *in substance* God, we see the rudimentary beginnings of a theological perspective that would later develop into the Christian concept of the Trinity – the "three-in-one" nature of God.

\* Literally, *Yah saves*. *Yah* is the shortened version of *Yahweh* (or Jehovah), God's covenant Name.

<sup>1</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, Jewish Encyclopedia, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=399&letter=M>

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