Introducing the Incarnate Christ: How John’s Logos Theology Sets the Stage for the Narrative Development of Jesus’s Identity

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Abstract

Many who have undertaken a critical reading of the Gospel of John have found it difficult to see the connection between the Prologue (1:1-18) and the Gospel narrative. While some of the language in the Prologue surfaces throughout the rest of the Gospel, its central term, “Word” (logos) does not show up as a title for Christ within the Gospel narrative. This paper will attempt to explore the integral connection between John’s Logos theology and Jesus’s I AM statements in the rest of the Gospel by examining the use of the term memra in Jewish Targums, especially its connection to creation by fiat (“let there be”), and how Memra theology can be understood as a theological thread weaving the Prologue and the Gospel narrative together.

With beautifully poetic prose, the Fourth Gospel opens with what has been appropriately called the Prologue (1:1-18). Not only is this Prologue unique in the biblical canon, it is distinctive even in the context of the book it introduces. Indeed, many who have undertaken a critical reading of John’s Gospel have found it difficult to see how certain central themes within the Prologue are present throughout the Gospel narrative. Although some language in the Prologue, such as “light”...

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the interdisciplinary theology conference on New Creation co-sponsored by Northeastern Seminary at Roberts Wesleyan College and the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association (CETA), October 2013, in Rochester, NY. I am grateful for the feedback I received from the attendees at this meeting. The expanded written paper was the winner of the Roberts Wesleyan College/Association of Christian Librarians Research Award for 2014.

(phōs), “darkness” (skotia), “glory” (doxa), and “truth” (alethēia), show up later in the Fourth Gospel, its central term, “Word” (logos), is never used as a title for Jesus outside of the Prologue. Some scholars, such as John Ronning and Martin McNamara, have made significant strides in easing the tension between the Prologue and the narrative by examining Jewish Targums as a possible background to John’s Logos theology. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to the way in which Memra theology from the Targums shows up not only in the Prologue, but also in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel.

This paper will attempt to explore the integral connection between John’s Logos theology (in the Prologue) and Jesus’s I AM statements (in the rest of the Gospel) by examining the use of memra (Aramaic for “word”) in Jewish Targums, especially the connection of Memra theology to creation by fiat (“let there be”) and how this theology can be understood as a theological thread weaving the Prologue and the Gospel narrative together.

A Word on Memra, Targums, and Methodology

Before mining the Targums for the ways in which memra is used, it will be helpful to give some orientation to the term itself, as well as to the nature of the Targums, and which Targumic texts will be important for this study.

I am using the term memra and the phrase “Memra theology” to represent the Aramaic word mēmrā’ (which sometimes occurs as mēmrā’, mîmrā’, or mē’mār). This noun, derived from the verb ’āmar (to say or speak), seems to be the Aramaic equivalent of Hebrew dābār and Greek logos.

The term “Targum” is an English transliteration of Hebrew tārgûm, meaning “translation.” It typically refers to the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. As the LXX is a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek for a Hellenized Jewish community, the Targums are translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic for an Aramaic-speaking Jewish audience.

However, the Targumists did not simply translate the Hebrew text into Aramaic; they often added their own interpretive elements and used memra to create a theological thread that connected the Prologue and the Gospel narrative. This approach allowed the Targumists to explore the nature of God’s Word and its interaction with the world.

Additionally, “fullness” (plēroma) and “grace” (charis) appear only in John’s Prologue and nowhere else in the Gospel narrative. For a helpful discussion on the vocabulary differences between the Prologue and the narrative, see Paul N. Anderson, The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 67-69.


For an excellent resource on Targums, the Aramaic Bible series offers an English translation and introduction to each Targumic book. For reading the Targums in Aramaic online, visit http://call1.cn.huc.edu/ (the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon Project).
maic; they frequently took interpretive liberties by expanding upon the original text. In this way, the Aramaic Targums resemble something like an informal commentary on the Hebrew Bible, through which contemporary readers can discern the theological motifs and expressions of the time period within which they originated.

Although the theology of Memra occurs in a number of Jewish Targums, my interest will be primarily in Targum Neofiti 1 (Tg. Neof.). This particular Targum is the most substantial of the western or Palestinian Targums, and covers all five books of the Pentateuch.

The question then arises concerning the dating of Tg. Neof. What time period is it from? This is an important consideration, since arguing for the dependence of the Gospel of John on Tg. Neof. would be erroneous if the Targum originated after the New Testament was written. This is precisely Joseph A. Fitzmyer’s argument. He notes (correctly) that Tg. Neof. was written during the Late Aramaic period (A.D. 200-700), and concludes that this dating puts Tg. Neof. “well beyond the period of the composition of biblical books, even those of the NT.”

This does not, however, mean that Tg. Neof. is irrelevant for the study of John’s Gospel. Géza Vermès suggests four possibilities for understanding the relationship between the NT and the Targums: It could be that (1) the similarities are a matter of coincidence, or (2) the Targumists borrowed from the NT, or (3) the NT writers depended on the Targums, or (4) both the NT and the Targumic texts have their origin in “Jewish traditional teachings.” Vermès argues for the fourth option, suggesting that while there is no dependence between the Targums themselves and the NT writings, it is most likely that, in a common culture, there were common terms and expressions that were used in order to effectively communicate to a people who shared a common worldview.

A contemporary analogy might be the way contemporary Christians use the term “Trinity” to express the Godhead. If a congregation uses the term “Trinity” in their belief statement, it would not be assumed that they borrowed the term from another congregation’s belief statement. Instead, the term is so embedded in the worldview of the church that anyone using it can assume that their audience will understand the theological weight—at least, in part—of what they are trying

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to convey. Such is the case for the distinctive use of the “word” of God in the NT (logos) and the Jewish Targums (memra).

In what follows, I will first examine the use of memra in Tg. Neof. on creation texts, then I will shift to the use of memra in a variety of Targums on Exodus 3:14 (the revelation of the divine name). This will clarify how Memra theology expresses YHWH’s identity as creator and redeemer.

Memra and the Tetragrammaton: Agent of Creation and Redemption

In both the MT and the Targums, YHWH is the divine creator who brings everything into existence by his word. However, the way YHWH’s agency in the creation event is expressed differs between the MT and the Targums. Although there are multiple places in the Targums to which we could turn for examining the theology of the creation event, I will focus on two creation texts from Tg. Neof. that illustrate well how memra is used. The first text is Genesis 1 and the second, somewhat surprisingly, is Exodus 12 (which describes the Passover in the MT, but which is expanded in the Targum with a reference to creation). In both of these texts the name “YHWH/ the Lord” and the phrase “the memra of the Lord” are used as interchangeable equivalents to express both God’s speech and God’s act of creation.10

*Genesis 1*

In Tg. Neof. the term memra occurs twenty-four times throughout the creation narrative of Genesis 1 (technically 1:1-2:3). After the creation event is completed, memra does not come on the scene again until Gen 3:8 and appears infrequently afterwards.11 This suggests that, for the Targumist, memra was a central motif in the creation event.

Throughout the MT of Genesis 1, there is a consistent pattern to the way God’s agency is expressed in creation, commonly known as the fiat pattern: God speaks and there is. In Hebrew this pattern is expressed by the twofold occurrence of the word, yěhî (יְהִי), which means both “let there be” and “it was so.” In Tg. Neof. this pattern has been modified. In fact, there are two different modifications, evident in a comparison between Gen 1:20-21 and 1:26-27.

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10 In the Targums the Tetragrammaton (the four consonants of the divine name) is replaced with three yodhs (יֵ). Similar to the Massoretic insertion of the vowels for adonai into the tetragrammation, this is meant to help prevent the reader from accidentally speaking the unutterable divine name. From here on, all references to “the Lord” in translations of the Targums should be understood to represent the three yodhs.

11 This does not include the marginal glosses of Tg. Neof., where memra occurs quite frequently; although, this usage is still less frequent than in Genesis 1 of the Neofiti text.
Genesis 1:20-21

“And the Memra of the Lord said: ‘Let the waters swarm forth a swarm of living creatures’ . . . . And the Lord created . . . every living creature which the waters swarmed forth.”12

Genesis 1:26-27

“And the Lord said: ‘Let us create man’ . . . . And the Memra of the Lord created the man . . . and the Glory of the Lord blessed them.”13

In Gen 1:20-21 of Tg. Neof., the “Memra of the Lord” is the agent of creation by speech; it is the memra who says, “let the waters swarm,” while the subject of the verb “created” is “the Lord.” This “memra speaking/the Lord doing” pattern is reversed in Gen 1:26-27. In this text the Lord says, “let us create man” and it is “the Memra of the Lord” that does the actual creating. So we have the situation where both the agent of the act of creating and the agent of creation by fiat can be expressed by either “the Lord” or “the Memra of the Lord.”

Yet, the role of Memra in creation does not end here. After the Lord speaks creation into existence by fiat, “let there be,” the Targums change the reading of the MT, “and it was so,” to say that “it was so according to his Memra.”14 Again, Memra is an agent of creation alongside the Lord.

It is worth noting a final example from Tg. Neof. of Genesis 1: “And the Memra of the Lord said: ‘Let there be light’; and there was light according to the decree of his Memra . . . and the Memra of the Lord separated the light from the darkness” (1:3).15 In this text the Memra of the Lord shatters the primordial darkness and brings light to creation.

Exodus 12

The second text that stands out as paramount when looking at Memra in creation is a midrashic poem on Exodus 12:42 where, in the MT, the writer states that the Passover night was a vigil of the Lord to be kept by all the Israelites for subsequent generations. Tg. Neof. states that this night was “set aside for redemption to the name of the Lord at the time the children of Israel were brought out redeemed from the land of Egypt.”16 The Targumist goes on to describe this one night as

12 Martin McNamara, Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis (Aramaic Bible 1A; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 54 (emphasis added).
13 McNamara, Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis, 55 (emphasis added).
14 Tg. Neof. Gen 1:7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30.
15 McNamara, Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis, 52-53.
four nights in which the sacred events of history are summed up, from creation on the first night to the promise of a future King Messiah on the fourth. As Tg. Neof. has it,

The first night: when the Lord was revealed over the world to create it. The world was without form and void, and darkness was spread over the face of the abyss, and the Memra of the Lord was the light, and it shone, and he called it the First Night.17

It is striking that the Targumist begins the scope of redemption history with a survey of the creation event. Not only that, but this survey includes the function of memra not as the creator of light, but as the actual light that brings an end to the primordial darkness. This is similar to John’s Prologue, where God’s logos is identified with the light shining in the darkness (John 1:5-9), a light that the rest of the Fourth Gospel consistently identifies with the redemptive presence and agency of Jesus (John 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9-10; 12:35-36, 46).

On the fourth night of the Passover vigil, the Targumist describes a future time when the entire world will be redeemed. Included in this cosmic redemption is the removal of bondage and wickedness, headed by what at first appears to be two great redemptive figures: Moses and the King Messiah. Yet, the Targumist affirms the presence of a third figure: “One will lead at the head of the flock, and the other will lead at the head of the flock, and his Memra will lead between the two of them.”18 In articulating this future redemption, the Targumist employs language reminiscent of a shepherd leading the flock (an image used of Jesus in John 10). Just as Memra was involved in creation as the cosmic luminary, it is also involved in the cosmic redemption of the world by shepherding the flock between Moses and the King Messiah. Thus, in the Passover vigil the Targumist connects the role of Memra in creation with the redemptive work of YHWH contextualized in the Exodus event and the future cosmic redemption, in which Memra takes center stage. Memra is an agent of both creation and redemption. This motif is further unpacked in Exodus 3, a text of paramount importance for understanding YHWH’s identity.

Memra and I AM: The Divine Name and the Creative Word
The story of Moses’ conversation with YHWH at the burning bush in Exodus 3 is as popular as it is cryptic. Of interest to this study is the way in which Tg. Neof. interprets God’s self-disclosed name. In this text, Moses is summoned to lead the Israelites out of the bondage of slavery from the Egyptians. Struck with fear

17 McNamara, Targum Neofiti 1 and Psuedo-Jonathan: Exodus, 52 (emphasis added).
18 McNamara, Targum Neofiti 1 and Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus, 52 (emphasis added).
and self-doubt, Moses asks God what name he should tell the Israelites when they ask who sent him. God responds with words that have echoed throughout history: ʾehyeh ʾašer ʾehyeh (אֶֽהְיֶ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֣ר אֶֽהְיֶ֑ה), popularly translated as “I am who I am”; and God follows this up by telling Moses to let the Israelites know that ʾehyeh (“I am”) has sent him (Exod 3:14). Thus the abbreviated ʾehyeh, along with the longer version, ʾehyeh ʾašer ʾehyeh, seems to function as God’s name; and this is confirmed in 3:15 where God’s name is specified as YHWH, which most biblical scholars think represents the third person singular of ḫyḥ, the verbal root of ʾehyeh.19

Before YHWH’s disclosure, there is a slight hint of this name in 3:12 when God first responds to Moses’ self-doubt. He says, “I will be [ʾehyeh] with you.” Neofiti changes the MT here from “I will be with you” to “I, namely my Memra, will be with you.”20 In this instance, Memra has become an exegetical stand-in for the divine name ʾehyeh. Yet, what might be the link between these two terms? What prompted the Targumist to bring together the Aramaic word memra and the Hebrew title ʾehyeh and to use these terms interchangeably, to express God’s identity? What is the basis of this usage?

As we saw earlier, the actual word God speaks to create in Genesis 1 is yĕhî (“let there be”). This word has a philological connection with ʾehyeh (“I am” or “I will be”), in that both verbs share the same root, ḫyḥ (the Hebrew verb “to be”). Put differently, the word YHWH uses to call creation into existence is a version of his own name. This has led J. Gerald Janzen to conclude that “clearly the Targumists at this point associated ʾehyeh in Exod 3:12-15 with yehi in Gen 1:3, not only philologically but theologically.”21 Thus the term ʾehyeh is taken to designate God essentially as creator, the one who calls the world into being, and moreover who does this by his word. This complex of ideas finds expression in the Targums by the use of the term memra.

There is a further connection between the divine name and creation. In three different Targums (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan [Tg. Ps.-J.], Targum Neofiti 1 [Tg. Neof.] and the Fragmentary Targum on the Pentateuch [Frg. Tg.]), the Targumists interpret ʾehyeh ʾašer ʾehyeh in Exod 3:14 as linking the past creative act of YHWH with the present redemption through Moses, and in two cases (Tg. Neof. and Frg. Tg.) also with the future redemption of the world.

19 Thus YHWH probably means “he is” or “he will be,” or (according to a tradition in Old Testament scholarship, going back to Frank Moore Cross) YHWH is to be understood as the Hiphil of ḫyḥ, thus designating God as creator (“he causes to be”).
“He who said and the world was, who said and everything was.” Then he said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I am who-I-am-and-who-will-be has sent me to you.’”

“Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I am who I am and who will be has sent me to you.’”

“And the Memra of the Lord said to Moses: The one who said to the world from the beginning: “Be” and it was … will say in the future, ‘Be.’ And he said: Thus should you say to the children: I AM … sent me to you.”

This threefold temporal reference is grounded by the Targums in the threefold use of ʾehyeh in 3:14 (“I am who I am” and “I am has sent you”). These Targums seem to play on the fact that ʾehyeh is in the Hebrew yiqtol conjugation (also called the imperfect), which lacks temporal specificity. The result is that YHWH’s identity as creator (in the past; and ʾehyeh in Exodus 3 was already associated with yĕhî in Genesis 1) is here integrally linked with his identity as redeemer (in the present and the future); all of this is expressed by the term memra. Thus Robert Hayward concludes that for the Targumists memra is “God’s Name ʾHYH, which by midrashic exposition refers to His presence in past and future creation, history, and redemption.”

Targumic Resonances in the Johannine Prologue

The relationship of memra to creation and redemption is so intertwined in the Targums that it is almost impossible to mention the function of the memra in one without reference to the other. Yet this connection between creation, redemption, and God’s Word is not unique to the Targums. The prologue of John resonates with the Targum’s creative-redeemptive function of the divine Word in three ways.

The Unity Between the Logos and God

First, just as memra functions as an interchangeable equivalent with YHWH, John opens his Gospel with a statement of unity between God and the logos: “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Echoing Gen 1:1, both John’s Gospel and Tg. Neof. affirm the same point: to refer to the Word is to refer to God.

Logos: The Agent of Creation

The second Targumic resonance we see in the Prologue is the creative function

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of the Word. The Gospel writer emphasizes that everything (panta/ πάντα) came into being through the Word (John 1:3, 10). This creative agency vis-à-vis the Word is even more explicit in the Greek text. Of the eighteen verses making up the Prologue, the Greek verb, ginomai (γίνομαι; meaning “to be/ become/ come into being”) occurs in seven of the verses, a total of nine times (John 1:3 [3x], 6, 9, 12, 14, 15, 17). The prevalence of this verb in association with the logos parallels the prevalence of memra in Genesis 1 of Tg. Neof. Just as memra was a central motif in the Genesis 1 creation narrative of Tg. Neof., ginomai is a central motif in John’s Prologue for describing the creative work of the logos.

Having first attributed all creaturely existence to the agency of the logos (1:3), the Gospel writer goes on to describe this logos as the giver of life, and this life is said to be the light of humanity (John 1:3b-4). With language similar to the first night of creation in Exodus 12 of Tg. Neof., the Gospel writer states that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overtaken it” (John 1:5). As the Prologue progresses, there is a gradual dawning of this life-giving logos in and among human beings. The light of the logos not only enlightens (phōtizei/ φωτίζει) all people, in the sense that through the logos humanity receives biological life (John 1:9), but the logos brings new (renewed) life to those who receive it (John 1:12a). Here the logos is the source of new creation.

Logos: The Agent of Redemption

But this means that the logos is the source of redemption. This new life the logos brings is described with language suggesting a rebirth experience in John 1:12, where those who receive the life-giving logos are granted “authority to become [ginomai] children of God” (see also John 3:5-8). This makes explicit the Prologue’s third resonance with the Targumic memra: the logos is the agent of both creation and redemption, bringing all things into being, and renewing life. The activity of this divine, creative-redemptive agent reaches its climax in John 1:14 when “the Word became [ginomai] flesh” in the person of Jesus Christ (though this name is not used until 1:17). Later on, Jesus’s own word (logos) brings eternal life (John 5:24). It is this creative-redemptive motif, built up so prominently in the Prologue, that the Gospel writer unpacks in the narrative of Jesus’s life, mission, and self-identification with the Father.

I AM: The Incarnate Word in the Gospel Narrative

The position argued in this paper, that the appropriate backdrop to the Prologue is
the creative-redemptive theology of the divine memra in the Targums, has been proposed by a number of scholars. However, John Ronning may be unique in claiming that the Targums also provide background for Jesus’s I AM statements. According to Ronning, “both expressions [Word and I AM] identify Jesus as the God of Israel, the one true God, so that the divine I AM sayings in the body of the Gospel complement the logos title in the Prologue.” Although Ronning insightfully grounds John’s logos title in Targumic memra, he does not consistently show that Jesus’s I AM statements are also grounded in the Memra theology of the Jewish Targums. While all of Jesus’s I AM statements are worthy of study, I will focus on two crucial statements (in John 6 and 8), both of which have explicit parallels to the Prologue’s logos and the Targumic memra.

I AM the Light of the World

One obvious parallel between Jesus’s I AM statements and the Targumic memra can be found in John 8. Immediately after sending the Pharisees away and forgiving the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus tells her, “I AM the light of the world; the one who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12). John here connects Jesus’s identity as the ‘ĕhyeh of Exodus 3 with the light that shines in the darkness, a connection reminiscent of memra in Tg. Neof., where memra was identified with the primordial light of Gen 1:3. We have already seen that the Prologue associates the logos with light; thus, the identity of Jesus in John 8 may be understood as his embodiment of this light—he is the light incarnate. This suggests that in John 8 Jesus’s I AM statement flows out of the same Targumic vein as the logos in the Prologue.

I AM the Bread of Life

Another I AM statement with significant Targumic parallels is found in John 6. After the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-15) and Jesus’s appearance to the twelve disciples while walking on water (John 6:16-21), we find the story of the crowd following Jesus to the other side of the Sea of Tiberias, where they press him for a miracle: “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?” (John 6:30) To bolster their petition, they cite Scripture, highlighting that their “ancestors ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (John 6:31). This becomes

28 See the account in McNamara, Targum and Testament Revisited, 146-66; and Ronning, The Jewish Targums, esp. 1-68.
29 Ronning, The Jewish Targums, 194.
30 Ronning grounds Jesus’s I AM statements primarily in the OT affirmations that YHWH is the only God (esp. in Deut 32:39 and Deutero-Isaiah, esp. Isa 43:10) and so renders ἐγώ εἰμι as “I am he.” Although he does make mention of the use of memra in Tg. Neof. and Frg. Tg. on Deut 32:39, this is not the core of his argument in his chapter on the I AM statements of the Johannine Jesus.
31 For a thorough examination of all twenty-two of Jesus’s I AM statements in John’s Gospel, see Ronning, The Jewish Targums, 194-223.
the focal point for the rest of the dialogue. Jesus responds by saying that the true bread from his father “comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33b). The crowd then asks, “Give us this bread always” (John 6:34) and Jesus responds by saying, “I AM the bread of life” (John 6:35), a statement that unites the redemptive provision of God in the exodus event with the life-giving function of Jesus’s incarnate mission.

The obvious OT parallel with John 6 is the story of God’s provision of manna to the Israelites in Exodus 16. However, there are closer literary parallels with Tg. Neof. than there are with the MT of Exodus 16.32 The MT of Exod. 16:4 states that YHWH “will rain down bread from heaven.” Tg. Neof., on the other hand, makes a slight modification by saying that YHWH “will make bread come down from heaven,” which parallels John 6:35, 38, 41, 50, and 58.

Furthermore, in some marginal glosses on Exod. 16:15 of Tg. Neof., the writer states that the manna was given “by the Memra of the Lord for you as food.”33 Whereas the Targumic “word” gave the manna to the Israelites in Tg. Neof., it is the Word made flesh, the divine I AM, that has become the manna which gives redemptive life to those who receive its eternal nourishment (John 6:35b).

Given that the Prologue of John associates the logos with both life and light (John 1:4), what we have in John 6 and 8 are narrative affirmations that the incarnate logos, Jesus of Nazareth, is the embodiment of this very life and light.34 Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus’s I AM statements reach back not just to the Prologue, but beyond the Prologue to the Targums of Exodus 3, where memra is associated with the creative-redemptive activity of the divine name, and even back to the Targumic interpretation of Genesis 1, where memra works alongside YHWH to bring life and light into being.35

**The Unity of the Fourth Gospel Grounded in Memra Theology**

This reaching back to creation is precisely what John intends by his use of logos in the Prologue. John is reaching back in order to look ahead, to make the claim that Jesus is the embodied Word (the memra of God in the flesh). This Word was the creative power behind the first acts of creation and has now entered history as an agent of redemption for a new creation. Just as YHWH / ʾehyeh created by speaking a word, yēhi (“let there be”) in the MT, and the memra of the Lord could be said to be the agent of creation in the Targums, so Jesus is the incarnate agent

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34 At other places throughout the Gospel, Jesus’s own word (logos) is intimately connected with life and light (John 3:34-36; 5:24; 12:46-50).
35 Not to mention the identification of memra with the light in the expansion of Exod 12:42 in Tg. Neof.
of new creation who, by his words and deeds gives people “the authority to become the children of God” (John 1:12), that they might be “born again” / “born from above” (John 3:3). With the theological thrust of the Targumic memra, Jesus continues Yhwh’s redemptive work by creating a new people of God, a theme that links John’s reference to the logos in the Prologue with Jesus’s later I AM statements in the Gospel.

By this use of logos, John’s Prologue introduces Jesus as one whose mission is in continuity with God’s past works of creation and redemption; we might even say that John’s Prologue gives the reader the “backstory” of Jesus, all the way back to “the beginning” (John 1:1). And Jesus’s I AM statements throughout John’s narrative pick up on this very thread. In this way, the narrative development of Jesus’s identity begins with the Prologue and is unpacked in Jesus’s self-disclosure throughout the Gospel.

In his prayer to the Father in John 17, Jesus states that his mission is to make known the Father’s name, which he says is also his very own name (John 17:11-12). The unity of the name of Jesus and the name of the Father gains greater depth by considering the grounding of this notion in John’s understanding of the logos in the Prologue and Jesus’s later I AM statements, and the grounding of both of these in the creative-redemptive memra of the ancient Targums. Jesus is the unique one who has, indeed, explained or exegeted (ἐξηγήσατο) the Father (John 1:18).36

36 I am thankful to J. Gerald Janzen for an insightful e-mail correspondence in which he pointed out a possible correspondence between Yhwh’s I AM statement in Exodus 3:14 and the wording of John 1:18. In the LXX of Exod 3:14, Yhwh’s affirmation “I am who I am” is rendered as ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὤν (ego eimi ha ōn). Interestingly, the phrase ὁ ὤν also occurs in the Prologue’s closing words: “the only begotten God, who is ὁ ὤν in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him” (John 1:18). Thus both ὁ ὤν in the Prologue and Jesus’s later use of ἐγὼ εἰμι in the Gospel narrative allude to the revelation of the divine name in Exod 3:14. In this way, Jesus’s I AM declarations are possibly anticipated in the Prologue not only by the presence of the logos lexeme as it resonates with the Targumic memra, but also by both the use of ὁ ὤν in describing the only begotten/unique one.