# SERMO: REOPENING THE CONVERSATION ON TRANSLATING JN 1,1

BY

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In the beginning was the conversation, not the word.

From Tertullian to Théodore de Bèze extends a tradition of translating λόγος in Jn 1,1 as *sermo*, a tradition now forgotten even by curators of antique words. Only when Erasmus restored the variant in his second edition of the New Testament (1519), and defended it with a battery of philological and patristic arguments, did the translation incite public debate.[1] With the Tridentine sanction of the Vulgate's *verbum*, however, the impetus for the tradition of *sermo* ceased. And although, fortified by Calvin's commentary on John, Bèze translated λόγος as *sermo* in his NT editions,[2] the proliferation of vernacular Bibles among Protestants soon submerged the philological and theological issue.

It deserves to be revived for scholarly examination. *Sermo* is the most ancient extant Latin translation for λόγος in the Johannine prologue. It conserves faith's witness to Christ the eloquent discourse of God, a witness historically diminished by the truth which the translation *verbum* served. And for contemporary philosophies and scientific linguistics which recognize meaning in the sentence, not the word, it may make better sense than a theology of the word.

Tertullian and Cyprian quote *sermo* in every citation of the opening verses of the Johannine prologue. In addition to eight quotations,[3] there

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[1] Erasmus, *Annotationes in evangelium Joannis* in *Opera omnia* 6 (Leiden 1703–1706) 335A–337C; *Apologia de "In principio erat sermo"*, LB 9, 111B–122F. The Leiden edition is abbreviated LB. "Sermo", the first chapter of my book *Erasmus on Theological Method* (Toronto in press) is entirely devoted to documentation and analysis of this. I thank the University of Toronto Press for permission to rework this here.

[2] Biblia sacra; sive, Testamentum vetus ab Im. Tremellio et Fr. Junio ex Hebraeo Latine redditum, et Testamentū novum a Theod. Beza è Graeco in Latinū verš (London 1656). See Calvin, *In evangelium Joannis*, 1,1, in: *Opera quae supersunt omnia* 47 (Brunsvigiae 1863).

[3] Tertullian, *Adv. Herm.* 20,4; *Adv. Prax.* 7,8; 8,4; 12,6; 13,3; 16,1; 19,6; 21,1.

is Tertullian's valuable, impartial testimony in *Adversus Praxean* that the *custom* of Latin Christians was to read *In principio erat sermo*, although he preferred *ratio* to *sermo*.[4] Cyprian twice quotes Jn 1,1 in *Adversus Iudaeos ad Quirinum* as *In principio fuit sermo, et sermo erat apud Deum, et Deus erat sermo*.[5] He also interprets *sermo* as Christ in three psalm verses and a passage from the Book of Revelation.[6] Cyprian is acknowledged a superior source of the Old Latin Bible because of his antiquity and because he repeats almost one-ninth of the New Testament. But if the modern theory of dual North African and European sources for the Old Latin Bible[7] is correct, then *sermo* in Tertullian and Cyprian may only demonstrate the former tradition. No European patristic writings in Latin contemporaneous with Tertullian survive for comparison. *Sermo* remains then the earliest extant Latin translation of λόγος in Jn 1,1 and on Tertullian's word the reading commonly circulated.

*Verbum* first occurs as a translation for λόγος in Jn 1,1 in Novatian's tract on the Trinity, but he reports *sermo* also.[8] After Novatian this ambivalence about *sermo* and *verbum* disappears until Augustine revives it. Hilary nine times cites the opening verses of the Johannine prologue and in every instance λόγος is translated as *verbum*.[9] By the fourth century *verbum* is universally preferred in the West. Eusebius Vercellensis' treatise on the Trinity quotes *verbum* in every citation of the prologue.[10] His evidence is important, not only because he may have transmitted the oldest European version of the Gospels, preserved in the codex Vercellensis (*a*),[11] but because he prefixes his citations of the verse with the explicit phrase "as it is written". Isaac Judaeus, in his exposition on the catholic faith at about the same time, also quotes *verbum* in the prologue, preceded by "thus it is said".[12] Zeno Veronensis reports *verbum*;[13] so does Maximus

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[4]  Tert. *Adv. Prax.* 5,3.

[5]  Cyprian, *Adv. Iud.* 2,3; 2,6.

[6]  Cypr. *Adv. Iud.* 2,3.

[7]  For a complete list of Old Latin Bible MSS. see *Vetus Latina*, ed. Bonifatius Fischer, 1, *Verzeichnis der Sigel* (Freiburg 1949).

[8]  Novatian, *De trin.* 13,1; 15,6; 21,3; 30,16.

[9]  Hilary, *De trin.* 1,10; 2,12; 2,23; 12,9; 12,56; *De Syn.* 24; 29; 69; *Tract. in Ps.* 122,7.

[10]  Eusebius Vercellensis, *De trin.* 3,46; 5,20; 5,22.

[11]  Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (Oxford ²1968) 73.

[12]  Isaac Judaeus, *Exp. fid. cath.*, CC, ser. lat., 9,347.

[13]  Zeno Veronensis, *Tract.* 2,8; 2,3.

of Turin.[14] The authoritative Ambrose cites·verbum in eighteen quotations of the prologue, attributed twice as "I read" and "he read".[15]

Meanwhile, how did the churches in Africa read the verse? Lactantius quotes *verbum* as the translation for λόγος in Jn 1,1, but in the context of his demonstration that λόγος means *sermo* or *ratio*.[16] Arnobius does not record the verse,[17] while Marius Victorinus preserves the Greek λόγος throughout his Latin hymns on the Trinity.[18]

The tradition of *sermo* as a translation for λόγος in Jn 1,1 surfaces again with Augustine's statement of two manuscript traditions, one which transcribed *sermo* and the other, *verbum*. Exegeting Jn 17,18, he explains that the Greek gospel has λόγος, which word also occurs in Jn 1,1. While the Greek always has λόγος, he continues, the Latin codices vary between *verbum* and *sermo*. While some versions have *In principio erat verbum* and *Verbum tuum veritas est*, others have *In principio erat sermo* and *Sermo tuus veritas est*. Both mean God's Word, his only-begotten, Augustine decides.[19] Other passages in which Augustine applies *sermo* to Christ in the gospel of John, in the psalms, and in the Pauline literature, substantiate his knowledge of *sermo* as a Christian translation for λόγος.[20] A native of North Africa, Augustine may have been privileged to codices of a regional tradition.

Perhaps Jerome was ignorant of *sermo* as a traditional translation for λόγος in Jn 1,1. Without leaving an explanation,[21] he chose *verbum*, a decision which astonished Erasmus.[22]

Although the Fathers sometimes used the words interchangeably, *sermo* and *verbum* are not synonymous. They may even be regarded as antonyms. *Verbum* may be argued a grammatically inaccurate, at least inappropriate, translation for λόγος in Jn 1,1.

Among its denotations λόγος means speech: a continuous statement, narrative, oration; verbal expression or utterance; a particular utterance

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[14]   Maximus Taurinensis, *Sermo* 39a *extr.* 3; *Sermo* 51,2; *Sermo* 64,2; *Sermo* 110 *extr.* 2.

[15]   Ambrose, *Hex.* 1,5; *De par.* 5; *De Is.* 5; *De interp.* 1,9; 4,4; *Exp. Ps.* 117,14,23; *De fide* 1,8; 1,19; 2,2; 5,1; 5,9; *De spir. sanc.* 1,11; 1,15; *Epist.* 11; *Tract. in evang. Luc.* 1,3; 2,40; 10,118.

[16]   Lactantius, *De Vera Sap. et Rel.*, 4,8–9.

[17]   Arnobius, *Adv. nat.*

[18]   Marius Victorinus, *De trin. hym.*, PL 8, 1141; 1142; 1141.

[19]   Augustine, *In Ioan. evang. tract.* 108.

[20]   Aug. *In Ioan. evang. tract.* 54; *Enn. in Ps.* 147,22.

[21]   Cf. Jerome, *Hom. in Ioann. evang.*, PLS 2, 183–188.

[22]   Erasmus, *Apologia de "In principio erat sermo"*, LB 9, 113E.

or saying; expression, utterance, speech regarded formally. Both the NT and Greek patristic literature employ these meanings. Even in the classical lexicon, where other meanings were more significant, λόγος signified a phrase, complex term, sentence, or complete statement, in opposition to a discrete word (*verbum*). It was a continuous statement such as a fable, legend, story, or speech delivered in court of assembly. Rarely meaning a single word, λόγος could never signify grammatically a vocable (ἔπος, λέξις, ὄνομα, ῥῆμα).[23]

*Oratio* is the Latin counterpart of this denotation of λόγος, as at least Erasmus knew, although he rejected it because of its gender.[24] The sense of colloquial familiarity which *sermo* has does not match the formality of λόγος, although the Fathers preferred it to *oratio*. Of *sermo* Varro wrote: "*Sermo* 'conversation', I think, is from *series* 'succession' ... for *sermo* 'conversation' cannot be where one man is alone, but where his speech (*oratio*) is joined with another."[25] *Sermo* signifies a literary conversation, discourse, disputation or discussion that is more informal and unpretending than *oratio*. *Sermo* means ordinary speech, speaking, talking and the language of conversation, as opposed to *contentio*. It also refers to national tongues. Literarily it is used of satiric verses in a conversational style, as in Horace. *Sermo* is also common talk, synonymous with report or rumor, and extends in that meaning to slander and calumny.[26] During the fourth century *sermo* became the Christian term for preaching, including catechesis and exegesis.[27]

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[23] λόγος, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, ed. Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, rev. Henry S. Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 2 (Oxford ⁹1940) 1058–1059; λόγος, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, ed. James H. Moulton and George Milligan (London 1930) 379; λόγος, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Cambridge 1957) 478–480; λέγω, λόγος, ῥῆμα, λαλέω, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 4 (Grand Rapids 1967) 69–143; λόγος, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe, 1 (Oxford 1961) 807–811.

[24] Erasmus, *Annotationes in Evangelium Joannis* LB 6, 335C; *Apologia de "In principio erat sermo"*, LB 9, 114A. In "Oratio", the second chapter of *Erasmus on Theological Method*, I trace the development in medieval grammar of the confusion of natural and grammatical genders and suggest Erasmus' dependence on it in this case.

[25] Marcus Terentius Varro, *De ling. lat.* 6,64.

[26] sermo, *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. Charleton F. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford 1879) 1679; sermo, *Totius Latinitatis Lexicon*, ed. Aegidio Forcellini, 4 (Prati 1845) 138; sermo, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, ed. A. Ernout and A. Meillet (Paris ⁴1959) 617; sermo, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard (Oxford ²1970) 979. Cf. Dominus du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et*

*Verbum* is grammatically the single word, abstracted from the discourse which *sermo* means and its implied context of an audience. *Verbum* means one word. To gain the sense of speech (λόγος) it must be pluralized, as in *verba facere* and other idiomatic expressions. In the singular its meaning may extend to a *sententia*, but this usage is ante-classical. The widest range of speech which *verbum* properly includes is a proverb. In grammatical parlance, *verbum* is a verb. The Greek counterpart of *verbum* is not λόγος but λέξις, precisely a vocable that λόγος can never signify grammatically.[28]

Although from Jerome's redaction until Erasmus' the translation of λόγος in Jn 1,1 came to be transmitted as *verbum*, Anselm of Canterbury,[29] Remigius,[30] Hugh of St. Cher,[31] Nicolas of Lyra,[32] Thomas Aquinas[33] and the *glossa ordinaria*[34] all interpret biblical occurances of *sermo* as Christ. Exegeting Heb. 4,12, for example, Thomas Aquinas refers *sermo* to the Son of God. "Considered in itself," he writes, "that word [*sermo*] seems to present a difficulty, but if we consider another translation the meaning is plainer. For where we have *sermo*, in Greek it is λόγος, which is the same as *verbum*; whence *sermo*, i.e. *verbum*."[35]

Did the translation of *verbum* for λόγος in Jn 1,1 originate in lexical chance or in a theological apology? This is impossible to establish on the

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*infimae latinitatis* 7 (Paris 1938) 438; J.-P. Migne, *Lexicon manuale ad scriptores mediae et infimae latinitatis* (Paris 1890) 2046.

[27] Christine Mohrmann, Praedicare-tractare-sermo, in: *Études sur le latin des chrétiens* 2 (Rome 1958–1965) 71.

[28] verbum, *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. Lewis and Short, 1972; verbum, *Totius Latinitatis Lexicon*, ed. Forcellini, 618. See n. 23.

[29] According to Erasmus, *Apologia de "In principio erat sermo"*, LB 9, 118C–D, although I have so far been unable to locate the cited passages in the modern critical edition of Anselm of Canterbury, *Opera omnia*, ed. Franciscus Salesius Schmitt, 1–2 (Segovia 1938–1940) and 3–6 (Edinburgh 1946–1961).

[30] Remigius of Auxerre, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, in: *Commentarius in Epistolas S. Pauli* PL 117, 849C, 849D, 850C, 851B. In this edition the work is wrongly attributed to Haymo of Falversham. See M. Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* 1 (Munich 1911) 516–517.

[31] Hugh of St. Cher, *Opera omnia in universum vetus, et novum testamentum* 7 (Venice 1732) 246A–D.

[32] Nicolas of Lyra, *Biblia sacra cum glossa ordinaria*, ed. Strabo Fuldensis, 6 (Paris 1590) 835–836.

[33] Thomas Aquinas, *In Epistolam ad Hebræos*, in: *Opera omnia* 13 (New York 1949) 705.

[34] *Glossa ordinaria* PL 114, 651A; PL 113, 1180D. The authorship is mistakenly attributed in this edition to Walafrid Strabo, whereas it is the work of Anselm of Laon and others.

[35] See n. 33.

evidence, difficult to assess. But there appears to be in Latin patristic thought, and this is speculation on a rationale for *verbum,* a fusion or confusion of the doctrine of Christ as revelation (λόγος) and as the only-begotten (μονογενής) so that one Son has been conceptualized as one Word.

Trinitarian definitions of the Son's distinction from the Father reflected Christian belief in the sufficiency of Christ's mediation in the divine economy. Tertullian first claimed that the Persons of the Trinity are numerically distinct, although inseparable, and thus "capable of being counted".[36] But it was Augustine who, in his exegesis of Jn 1,1, equated one Son and one Word. To the believer's inquiring mind he wished to disclose a Son who was the unique, single generation of the Father. He wrote, "Then in the text that follows: 'And the Word was with God,' the Word is certainly understood to be the Son alone, and not the Father and the Son together as though both were the one Word."[37] Again, in the interpretation of Jn 17,18 cited above he harmonized the only-begotten Son with *verbum.*[38]

Concerned to distinguish God's Persons against the Modalistic claims of Sabellius and others, Augustine's argument lapsed into a problematic computation which he inherited from his adversaries. Whereas he might have argued that the one Son is one Oration, he understood the Son as the Word, the Father's single undivided utterance. Would *oratio* or *sermo* have compromised the only-begotten Son any more than the unity of a discourse is compromised by its composition from many words? A brilliant rhetor, Augustine did not develop a theology of the Son as copious discourse (λόγος), the Father's full and eloquent oration.[39] Despite his modesty about his speculation on the Trinity, his partial perspective on the mystery of the λόγος was wholly adopted.

In Augustine's debt in the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury was still explaining that "this expression [of God] does not consist of more words than one, but is one Word". God's expression must be consubstantial with his nature, Anselm argues, because the unity and indivisibility of the supreme spirit dictate this. "For, if it is so consubstantial with the

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[36]   Tert. *Adv. Prax.* 2,4.
[37]   Aug. *De trin.* 6,2.
[38]   See n. 19.
[39]   Kenneth Burke reads in Augustine's conversion an attachment to the single Word in deliberate repudiation of his career as a rhetor, a salesman of many words, in *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Boston 1961) 114.

supreme nature that they are not two spirits, but one; assuredly, just as the latter is supremely simple, so is the former. It therefore does not consist of more words than one, but is one Word, through which all things were created."[40] The father of scholastic method recognized no grammatical inconsistency in terming the divine λόγος *locutio*, then claiming that this *locutio* consists of one, single word. Aquinas refined the confusion by arguing that because God understands himself and all creation by one act, only one Word is begotten. His doctrine of *verbum* does include belief in the Son as the Father's revealing conversation with all creatures,[41] but his choice of the term *verbum* undermines it.

Adding to the diminishment of *sermo* was the theory of the *verbum abbreviatum* which also formulated patristic and medieval faith in the sufficiency of Christ. Often appearing in apologies against the "perfidy" of the Jews, is the argument that Jesus is an abridged word. The many words of the Hebrew authors have yielded to the one Word, Christ, in whom the entire Scripture converges uniquely. Theologians appealed to Rom 9,28, "An abbreviated word God spoke upon the earth."[42]

If the patristic choice of *verbum* as a translation for λόγος in Jn 1,1 was accidental, and not intended to support the theology sketched above, it served that end eventually. For Erasmus, editing the first Greek and Latin edition of the New Testament,[43] this semantic indiscretion of the early Church diminished its faithful testimony to Christ as the Father's eloquent oration to men. "*Sermo*," he argued, "more perfectly explains why the evangelist wrote λόγος, because among Latin-speaking men *verbum* does not express speech as a whole but one particular saying. But Christ is for this reason called λόγος: because whatsoever the Father speaks, he speaks through the Son."[44] Because the λόγος is the Father's copious discourse, his sufficient revealing oration, *verbum* (one word) is inadequate to designate him. With humanist concern for the correct alignment of words and reality (Cicero's *verba et res*) and with humanist revival of divine con-

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[40]  Anselm, *Monologion*, in: *Opera omnia*, ed. Schmitt, 1, 30. Cf. *Epistola de incarnatione verbi*, in: *Opera omnia* 2, 10.

[41]  Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 34, art. 1,2,3.

[42]  Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* 3 (Paris 1959–1964) 187–197.

[43]  Published by Johannes Froben (Basel 1516). The NT of the Complutensian Polyglot Bible was prepared for press already in 1514, but was not published until 1520, papal approval pending.

[44]  Erasmus, *Annotationes in Evangelium Joannis* LB 6, 335C; cf. 335A,B and *Apologia de "In principio erat sermo"*, LB 9, 121D, 122D.

versation as a paradigm for men, Erasmus restored *sermo* briefly again.[45]

Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas might have objected that *sermo*, meaning a discourse or conversation composed of many words, jeopardizes faith in the simplicity of the Father's utterance, the only-begotten Son. One can choose *verbum* for this apologetical reason, to safeguard the simplicity of the Father's generative act, and distend grammar to serve theology. Or one can employ the grammatically correct *sermo*, rendering the Greek New Testament faithfully, and restrict its theological application. Which compromise is better? The implications for theological method are substantial.

*Verbum* or *sermo*? If, as Augustine argued seminally in *De trinitate*, believers may glimpse Christ by examining the human experience of speaking,[46] then *verbum* seems an appropriate analogy as long as men accept the Platonic dictate that the morpheme is the basic unit of language, and meaning, the computation of such signs.[47] Scientific linguistics today asserts the primacy of syntax over semantics, led by the demonstration of Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar that the Platonic appeal to morphemes as the basis of meaning is meaningless.[48] As the perception of language shifts, a theology of the word (*verbum*) may become anachronistic and the ancient witness to Christ as discourse (*sermo*), timely again.[49]

In his acclaimed analysis of the doctrine of the Word, Bernard Lonergan assumes that *verbum* was the traditional translation for λόγος in the Latin Church before Augustine.[50] That is not so, as the reader has seen. Recovering the Christian patrimony of *sermo* can only enrich appreciation of the mystery of Christ as the λόγος. What sort of theology might emerge from this paradigm?

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[45]  See my *Erasmus on Theological Method.*

[46]  Aug. *De trin.* 9,7–9; 15,11; 15,15; *De doctr. chr.* 1,8; 2,1–4.

[47]  Plato, *Crat.* 421D–427D.

[48]  Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague 1966). Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris 1960) and Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique genérale*, ed. Rudolf Engler (Wiesbaden 1967–1968); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations; Philosophische Untersuchungen*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford 1963).

[49]  The author expects to develop this in a journal of speculative theology.

[50]  Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum*, ed. David B. Burrell (Notre Dame 1967) introduction, x.