

What was ‘The Word’ in the 1st Century

[This is a technical article]

In ancient Israel ‘the word of God’ or ‘the word of the Lord’ was the what prophetic individuals received from God and delivered to the assigned audience. The OT prophets received ‘the word of the Lord’ under the unction of the Spirit and prophesied to the king and the nation.¹ The NT prophets were the NC believers such as the Apostles, Paul, Timothy, Stephen, etc., who were able to prophesy from the Spirit² within them. They also prophetically spoke and wrote, just like we do today. They called their preaching to the non-believers ‘the word’³. Now this was not the Bible⁴, it was whatever the Spirit gave them to speak at the time. In Acts it states that “The word of God spread”⁵ because the believers went everywhere “preaching the word”⁶. It wasn’t the Bible that spread, it was the good news that the Kingdom had arrived.

Jesus used the term ‘the word’ to refer to the message of the Kingdom.⁷ He used the term ‘the word of God’ for what was spoken to Moses⁸, but he wasn’t referring to all of the OT. In the Gospels & Acts ‘the word’ is used to describe Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom – i.e. what people heard him speak directly to them.⁹ The Gospels also differentiate between the scriptures and ‘the word’ that Jesus spoke¹⁰, as does Acts with ‘the word’ the Apostles spoke.¹¹

Many Christians today refer to the Bible as “The Word of God” or “The Word”. However, we already know that the Bible never refers to itself as that.¹² We also know that ‘The Word of God’ is everything that God has said, is saying and will say.¹³ What we actually have in the scriptures is a collated record of some significant events and statements that people made in ancient times. (Remember, if everything Jesus said and did was written down, the whole world may not have enough room for the books it would take to do the job.)¹⁴

Christians also believe that God inspired every piece of the text (viz. every word) that was recorded so it is a message from him that they need to read and learn. However, Paul writing to Timothy refers to the Hebrew scriptures (i.e. the OT) as being useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness, and to equipped believers for good works.¹⁵ He did not refer to the OT scriptures as being ‘holy’ or as words from God to be revered.

If the Bible really was ‘The Word of God’ it would have been stressed in the scriptures in numerous places, but it isn’t. By the absence of this confirmation most Christians regard it as understood by the first church as a fact – a maxim they lived by. But what did the believers of the 1st century regard as ‘The Word of God’? Lets explore what history records.

“Christian students of Scripture have long acknowledged “theophanies” in the Hebrew Bible, occasions upon which the supernatural Eternal Master of the Universe would manifest or appear in the natural realm for a divinely assessed purpose. Recall “Then Adonai appeared to him by Mamre’s large trees”¹⁶. Or remember the Lord’s (Adonai’s) appearance to Gideon as the Eternal “sat under

1 – e.g. 1 Samuel 15:10-11; Isaiah 38:4-5; Jeremiah 11:1-3; Ezekiel 6:1-3; Hosea 1:1-3; Joel 1:1-3; Micah 1:1-3; Zephaniah 1:1-3; Haggai 1:3

2 – Acts 14:3

3 – e.g. Acts 4:4, 31; 6:2, 4; 8:25; 10:44; 13:5, 44, 46; 14:25, 35-36; 16:32; 18:11; (Luke 3:2)

4 – Acts 19:20

5 – Acts 6:7; 8:14; 11:1, 19; 12:24; 13:49; 16:6

6 – Acts 6:7

7 – e.g. Mark 4:14; Matthew 13:19-23;

8 – e.g. Mark 7:13

9 – Mark 2:2; Mark 4:33; Mark 16:20; Luke 5:1; 11:28; John 4:50; 12:48; 14:24; 15:3, 20; Acts 10:36; 11:16

10 – John 2:22

11 – Acts 17:11

12 – canberraforerunners.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/The-Word-of-God-is-What-the-Spirit-Gives-Us-to-Speak.pdf

13 – canberraforerunners.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/The-Word-of-God-is-What-the-Spirit-Gives-Us-to-Speak.pdf

14 – John 21:25

15 – 2 Timothy 3:16-17

16 – Genesis 18:1 (Tree of Life Bible -TLV)

the pistachio tree” while the youth engaged in “threshing wheat in the winepress”¹⁷.

The Lord has come other times as the “Captain of the Lord’s Hosts” or “Commander of Adonai’s Army” in Joshua 5:13-15. We witness the divine messenger of the covenant coming to “his temple” who is linked with Adonai-tzva’ot.¹⁸ These and other events are only some of the occasions when the Eternal Spirit of God entered the natural or physical realm as the Memra or Logos (“The Word”) to relay divine objectives to those functioning within and subject to the created order.”¹⁹

So, there’s a relationship between the Logos which John referred to and the Memra that the Israelis knew about. What is the Memra? It comes from of the Targum (the Aramaic OT):

*“Memra is an Aramaic term related to the Hebrew word, *emër*²⁰, pronounced ‘amair’, which means word, decree, or speech. Sometimes, the Hebrew word *dâbâr*²¹, pronounced ‘debair’, is used instead of memra, which also means word, as well as matter, thing, and issue.*

More than just the words of our Creator God (YHVH), Memra (and sometimes Dibber) convey God’s many manifestations and expressions in His creation through His Words.

The Jewish People became intimately familiar with the Memra as the Word of the Lord because they heard about it hundreds of times in the synagogues.”²²

The Israelis who lived in Samaria and Galilee in the 1st century AD heard the OT read to them in Aramaic in their synagogues because that was their native language, not Hebrew. They were Israelites from the ancient kingdom of Israel, not Jews from ancient Judah. This was the case for Jesus (who grew up in Nazareth, in Galilee) and his Galilean disciples. The Samaritans and Galileans were schooled in the Aramaic scriptures and were taught about “the word”, the Memra.

What more do we need to know about Memra?

*“This Aramaic term is a kind of ‘attribute’ used by the Targum to designate God or his presence, creative or liberating. Its usage can be compared with that of *dabar*, ‘word’, of *ruah haqqodesh*, ‘holy spirit’, of *iqar*, ‘glory’, in the Hebrew Bible; and of *Shekhinah*, ‘presence’, in the rabbinic writings. This can be seen in many passages of the Targums, for example in the Pseudo-Jonathan to Exodus 15:25: “...the Memra of Yhwh imposed upon him the Sabbath precept...”; or 15:26: “...if you listen to the Memra of Yhwh your God, and if you do what is just before him...”; and again, 16:3: “...the children of Israel said to him: ‘Would to heaven we had died by the Memra of Yhwh in the land of Egypt’...”. Thus the prologue of John brings together in one sentence the three terms ‘word’, ‘dwelling’ and ‘glory’: “...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...we have beheld his glory”.”²³*

Jesus (Messiah) is given the Memra attribute by John because he was the presence of God on Earth in that day. The spirit of the Son was placed in the body of Jesus of Nazareth who lived in Israel and travelled to Judah. His Memra glory was displayed by his actions as well as his transfiguration²⁴ on Mt Hermon²⁵. ‘The Word’ was no longer an theophany in the form of the appearance of God as a spirit, it had become an appearance in physical form.

So there you have it. The 1st century followers of Jesus knew that he was “The Word”. They also knew that whatever the Spirit gave them to speak/teach/preach was ‘The Word of God’.²⁶ Nothing else had that

17 – Judges 6:11,14 (Tree of Life Bible -TLV)

18 – Malachi 3:1

19 – “Yeshua: The Eternal Memra” mjbi.org/2014/09/12/yeshua-the-eternal-memra

20 – מַמְרָא

21 – דְּבַר

22 – “In the Beginning Was the Memra” free.messianicbible.com/feature/beginning-memra

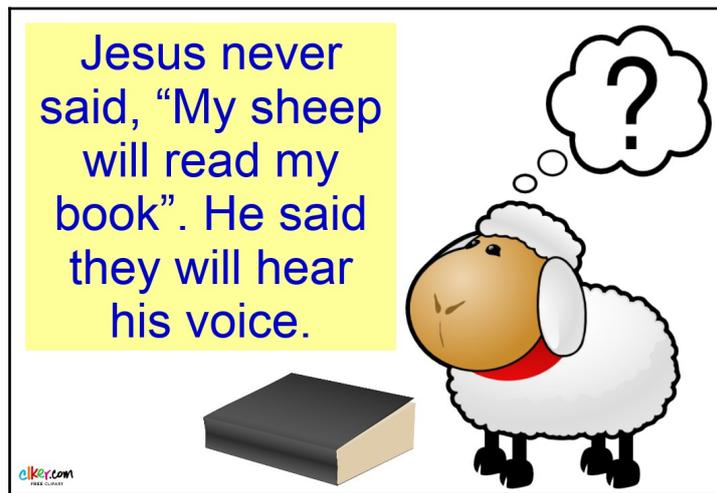
23 – Issa Diab (March 2014) “Paul’s Use of the Targum: Pauline Targumic Renderings” [academic paper] www.academia.edu/7900332/Pauls_Use_of_the_Targum

24 – Matthew 17:1-2

25 – Mt Hermon is the spiritually significant high mountain near Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27)

26 – Acts 4:31; 6:2, 7; 8:14; 12:24; 1 Corinthians 15:2; 2 Corinthians 2:17; Colossians 1:25; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 4:2

title. The term 'Word of God' for the Bible is a more recent invention coming mainly from evangelical protestants.



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