

The Concept of ‘The Word’ in the 1st Century

Why did John start off his Gospel record with an exposition on ‘The Word’?

ANSWER: Because every Jew had the Hebrew understanding of what ‘The Word’ was and they were earnestly looking forward to interacting with ‘The Word’ every day. The writers of the NT definitely had this understanding, as did Jesus and his disciples. It was this understanding of ‘The Word’ that was accepted, experienced, shared and preached by the believers of the 1st century.

This was (and still is) the genuine understanding of ‘The Word’ that a believer today should have when they read the Bible – both the OT and the NT. To do otherwise misses out on a Kingdom reality that goes right back to the Garden of Eden at creation.



The following is a summary of this topic from “The Lost Gospel of the Kingdom”¹.

‘The word’, was widely understood by the Hebrews from the time of Abraham, throughout the history of the Israelite nation, up to the end of the 1st century as the various mysterious manifestations of God that occurred in the world in order to bring the Kingdom reign of God to Earth. Hebraic tradition implicitly understood that ‘The Word’ was the means by which God’s reign came into the earth to accomplish his will.

‘Word’ as translated from *dabar* (Hebrew), in the ancient context of language usage, was a generalization about divine actions and events. It was also a literary term associated with dreams, visions, or other forms of divine encounters, such as angelic visitations, theophanies, and the presence of God. For example:

Genesis 22:16 (ESV) – “By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this (*dabar*/word)², and have not withheld your son, your only son...”

In the Hebraic tradition, ‘this thing’³, ‘Holy One’, ‘spirit’, ‘Spirit’ and ‘presence’ were synonymous with the ‘word’/ ‘God’s Word’/‘The Word’. This is because OT authors used different terms for the same thing, because they came from different backgrounds. Therefore, ‘The Word’, ‘Spirit’, ‘the presence of God’, etc., are equivalent in the Hebrew mind – and therefore in the entire Bible.

Knowing this, it’s important to read ‘word’ (*dabar*) as not referring to written text or the spoken word, but an indication of God manifesting in some peculiar way. For example: The following references using ‘word’ (*dabar*) do not refer to the writings of the OT. This concept is vitally important:

Psalms 107:20 (NIV) – He sent out his word and healed them...

Psalms 119:81(NIV) – My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word.

Psalms 119:105 (NIV) – Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Psalms 130:5 (NIV) – I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.

Can you now see the difference in what the Hebrew writers actually meant with these verses, compared to the theological understanding taught by Western theologians and Bible teachers today?

1 – Steven R. Service (2015) “The Lost and Forgotten Gospel of the Kingdom : A First Century Hebraic Perspective” [PDF of 2nd Edition] www.amazon.com.au/Lost-Forgotten-Gospel-Kingdom-Perspective-ebook/dp/B07124XNG9

FREE PDF: www.academia.edu/39895038/The_Lost_and_Forgotten_Gospel_of_the_Kingdom_A_First_Century_Hebraic_Perspective_2nd_Ed

2 – Actually, “this thing” – i.e. the action of sacrificing his son as God asked him to

3 – An occurrence due to the presence of God.

With the Hebraic mindset of the authors, these verses take on a completely different meaning. They are all about God's supply, presence and protection. They are not about the OT of the Bible being a section of "the Word of God".

The understanding of 'The Word' being connected to deity comes through very clearly in the Aramaic version of the OT. The OT was originally written in Hebrew, but it was translated into Aramaic (known as Targums) during the Babylonian captivity (597-539 BC) because their captors spoke Aramaic and the Hebrews were forced to learn it to survive. When they returned to the land of Israel, they continued to speak Aramaic and use the Aramaic Targums in their synagogues. In this regard, in Jesus' day, Judeans spoke Hebrew, Aramaic and Koine Greek (a Jewish version of Greek), the language of commerce.

The Targum translations radically personified 'word' using the term *memra*. *Memra* was understood to be One (i.e. God) who made visitations to have fellowship with his people and to provide protection for them, especially those who were righteous. For example, from the Aramaic OT:

Genesis 28:20 – And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, "If the *Memra* of the Lord will be my help, and will keep me in that way in which I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to wear, and bring me again in peace to my father's house, the *Memra* of the Lord shall be my God."

Genesis 3:8 – And they heard the voice of the Word of the Lord God walking in the garden...⁴

Genesis 3:10 – And he said, The voice of Thy Word heard I in the garden, and I was afraid...⁵

Memra was seen as the Deliverer of ancient Israel. The Targums are full of examples. The faithful were taught through the OT texts to call upon *Memra*, the abiding 'word' of God. *Memra's* personification of 'word' was so simple, even children could understand that *Memra* was God their sustainer. For example, from the Aramaic OT:

2 Chronicles 18:31 – Jehoshaphat cried out and the *Memra* of the Lord came to his aid.

2 Chronicles 20:29-30 – The *Memra* of the Lord had waged war against the enemies of Israel...the *Memra* of his God gave him rest on every side.

Loyalty to and faithful reliance on *Memra*, along with a wholehearted commitment to living according to his righteousness, were attributes that God looked for and honoured with his deliverance. By partnering with *Memra*, the Kingdom reign of God was established on the Earth.

It's important to realise that an encounter with *Memra* was the daily hope of every spiritually-minded Israelite. The promises for the continued abiding of *Memra* were not only for those he helped for their righteous ways, but also for their descendants.

Also, *Memra* was of great eschatological importance throughout the Aramaic scriptures. Where unrighteousness led to him abandoning them, there was always the promise of his future return. This is why John explained Jesus as 'the word' (*Memra*) – God had returned to aid his faithful people.

In conclusion, 'The Word' or 'Word of God' was the manifestation of the presence of God as he interacted with faithful people on the Earth, so the planet could be impacted by Heaven.



4 – As translation in the mid 1800's from the Aramaic Pentateuch by John Wesley Etheridge [*Horae Aramaicae* (1843)?]

See also "Targum Jonathan on Genesis 3: www.sefaria.org/Targum_Jonathan_on_Genesis.3?lang=bi

"The diversity in translation being conveyed helps us to see that in ancient times the terms "word" and "spirit" were understood as pointing to the same concept—the presence of God." [*Steven Service footnote p:240*]

5 – "Memra Torah – Word of the LORD" biblehandbookidea.wordpress.com/memra-torah-word-of-the-lord

★★★ How did Jesus relate to the Hebrew concept of ‘The Word’? ★★★

In the Hebrew mindset, Jesus was God because he was a manifestation of ‘the word’. It didn’t need any logic to prove that he was The Word. John stated it as a fact in his gospel record because Jesus typified many (or all) of the manifestations of ‘The Word’ while he was on Earth with his disciples. That was proof enough to the Hebrews.

So, what then was Jesus’ mission to the Jews and Samaritans (the remnant of the kingdom of Israel)? Was it to present himself as the Messiah? He did not do that directly, but he did indirectly prove he was the Messiah.⁶ Instead, it was to present himself as the long awaited (eschatological) *Memra* (‘Word’) who had returned to bless and support God’s faithful people.

“It was the very essence of the Rabbi Jesus’ life to help followers of Judaism see, hear, enter and experience ‘God’s word’, as the word was the means by which His reign was repeatedly manifest in the world from the time of Abraham to the historical present.”⁷

Even his teaching has this content, if it is read with *Memra* in mind. For example:

Matthew 13:10-11, 16-17 (NIV) – *The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them...But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

In the above passage Jesus’ mention of the “mysteries of the kingdom” was a reference to their personal experiences of seeing and hearing ‘The Word of God’ (i.e. himself and Heaven’s impact)! It was NOT what he was preaching and teaching.

Importantly, “the word of the Kingdom” in the parable of the sower should be viewed in light of ‘The Word’ being the impact of the Kingdom on the Earth through the manifestation of ‘The Word’ (Jesus), rather than the gospel message.

So, did Jesus just teach and preach about the Kingdom, or have we missed something else in his purpose?

Here’s what Jesus’ presence in Judea was heralding to the “Israel” of his day:

The ‘Word’ is here. Therefore the Kingdom reign of God on Earth is also here. It’s available to all the faithful and righteous who want to interact with it and experience its benefits. It’s free to all, through trust and obedience.



6 – There were about 5 proofs he demonstrated for the benefit of the Jewish leaders which they had predicted would be indicators that a person was the Messiah. See also: billygraham.org/story/the-glory-of-christ-5-ways-jesus-proved-hes-the-messiah

7 – “The Lost Gospel of the Kingdom” p:29

★★★ So, how did the Memra of God turn into the inspired writings of ★★★ the Bible which Christians believe to be ‘the Word of God’ today?

By the time of Origen⁸ (185-254 AD) few if any Jewish Christians remained in Judea because of persecution by the Jews and the Romans. They were either exterminated or had spread out from there, taking the gospel with them.

In 318 AD Emperor Constantine⁹ issued the Edict of Milan¹⁰ giving legal status of the Christian religion so it became sanctioned alongside Paganism¹¹. He also instigated the first Church Council at Nicaea¹² in 325 AD to formalize the faith and to clear up all the differences which had arisen due to the spread of believers and their need to go ‘underground’ to survive persecution. This doctrinal consensus was achieved through ‘majority rule’ so that the important questions were answered enabling the Christian religion to fit into the Greco-Roman world.

Church councils subsequent to Nicaea formalized Christian Orthodoxy¹³ (i.e. ‘the correct way of glorifying God’). The development of this Orthodoxy (viz. a unified system of theology) saw Christianity become an intolerant dictatorial politicized religious structure which did not allow for the freedom of thought or speech.

This move was all about control.¹⁴ This was control of the system by those who had the power and control over the people, forcing them into a single Catholic/Orthodox paradigm which no one was allowed to contradict or believe differently. The power from then on was kept with the Great Church¹⁵, not the *ekklesia* which Jesus instituted.

When all this unification of belief was taking place, the dominant force in the Western world by the 3rd century AD was the Greek mindset, attributed to Aristotle¹⁶ (384-322 BC). Under this mental attitude (AKA ‘rationalism’), logical explanations were required to legitimize, approve, or accept anything. Aristotelian logic¹⁷ operated via the hidden premise of the ‘Law of Non-Contradiction’¹⁸, where, if something could be contradicted in any way, it couldn't be true. Any Christian idea had to be explained in non-contradictory terms for it to be believed to be true or “the truth”.

In the Greek Platonic¹⁹ sense, Christian ‘truth’ was to do with factual information. This differed from the original believer's understanding of truth, based on Hebraic Eastern thought, where truth was understood as the ‘essence of God’s being’ that was imparted to people through encountering him. As Christianity changed into a Greek-thinking religion, the concept of ‘truth’, as the Spirit of God, was lost. Salvation then became the knowledge of objective scriptural ‘truth’, rather than a relationship with The Truth.

By the 4th century, the edicts of the church overrode experiencing Truth. Truth was no longer where character was miraculously transformed by God and where help was received from Heaven every day, through a loving and living relationship of divine intimacy. OT texts were originally a witness to a tangible pathway to this, where it led readers into participation with God’s Kingdom reign through revelation. In contrast, the new Western practice of using the scriptures as a divine knowledge base worked by taking individual verses out of context, in order to prove points of deductive logic that was used to provide a set of ‘true’ doctrines.

8 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origen

9 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_the_Great

10 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict_of_Milan

11 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paganism

12 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Council_of_Nicaea

13 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodoxy

14 – This is the same as the Chinese Communist Party persecuting religious groups such as Christians, Uyghur Müşîmîş and Falun Gong because they don't submit to the party rule in all matters. They can't control them, so they eliminate them.

15 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Church

16 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle

17 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Term_logic

18 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_noncontradiction

19 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonic

As a consequence, Orthodoxy limited God and his voice to the pages of the Bible. However, this was a book that the populace couldn't read because of widespread illiteracy. The Bible now contained 'God's word', so mystical experiences were no longer necessary. It was at this point that God was deemed to have stopped talking personally to people – he now only spoke through the Bible and church leaders.

Bishop Epiphanius²⁰ (310/320-403 AD) and the Orthodox church moved to extinguish the intuitive Hebraic concept that God's Kingdom reign enters the world when people encounter and experience subjective personal divine manifestations. This move caused Christianity to emphasise even more an intellectual and sacramental religion, the acquisition of religious knowledge and agreement with church doctrine.

Those like Origen who tried to understand the original gospel had to fight the church system. As a consequence, they had their reputations 'muddied', and after their deaths, their written works were collected and burnt to eliminate any vestige of their knowledge. When charismatic Montanism²¹ was finally eradicated, even the written works of Tertullian²² concerning the ecstasies of the spiritual life of the Montanists disappeared.

Saint Anthony, Pachomius, Shenouda the Archimandrite, Benedict of Nursia, and many others, abandoned the institutionalized Church and lived in the wilderness or in monastic communities where they were free to practice their spiritualities according to their consciences.²³

“The vast problem with Orthodoxy re-defining the ‘word’ as the ‘scriptures’ was that after the representation was popularized, it also became normative for references to the ‘word’ in the biblical texts to be identified as the text itself.”²⁴

Consequently, readers of the Bible superimposed their contemporary understanding on the contents as they read. It became the source book for religious doctrines and wise sayings, nothing more.

From the time of the Reformation²⁵ era (1517-1555)²⁶ onward, the phrase “The 'word' of God” was limited to the concepts of either the scriptures, the preached message from the Bible and/or the promises of God. Nothing, in this regard, had changed with the Protestant²⁷ move away from the Roman church system.

Obliterating the meaning of 'word' also caused the concept of God's Kingdom reign, extending to the Earth through the manifestation of *dabar*, to be lost. This is why English Bible translators since the KJV²⁸ (1611) have regarded the 'word' as written symbols or statements.

For this reason, the notion of the active 'word' or thinking of the 'word' as non-verbal actions, makes no sense today. For example: The Genesis statement that “the young man worded all the men of his town”²⁹, sounds ridiculous because the original meaning of 'word' has been blotted out of Christian knowledge.



20 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphanius_of_Salamis

21 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montanism

22 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertullian

23 – See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert_Fathers

24 – “The Lost Gospel of the Kingdom” p:198

25 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformation

26 – www.history.com/topics/reformation/reformation

27 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestantism

28 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_James_Version

29 – Genesis 34:24

CONCLUSION

The Bible was put together in the 4th century by Roman Catholic clerics, based on writings collected from from the distant past. This book should never have been called 'The Word' or 'The Word of God' because 'The Word of God' had manifested as the man Jesus of Nazareth³⁰. Every believer since Jesus' enthronement, as King of Kings, lives with 'The Word of God' because he lives in them and interacts with them on a daily basis, in the full expression of what 'The Word' always was for faithful people. That really is 'The Word'.



ADDENDUM

Today my wife said to me, "I feel good". I could see by her face that she felt really good, not just good. She added, "It's spiritual". I responded, "The spiritual impacts the natural". Of course, I meant it impacts in a positive way when it's the Trinity who's involved, not the enemy.

That was a perfect 'for-instance' of a person experiencing 'The Word of God' (*Memra*) just as the Hebrews understood it.

IMPORTANT

This article is not an attempt to elevate the faith of messianic Jews in any way, nor is it a push to go back to the *ekklesia's* Jewish roots. It's about understanding the way the Trinity had set up for humans to connect with them, their way. Of course, this was modified once the New Covenant was inaugurated.

Laurence
29-12-2020
(www.CanberraForerunners.org)

COPYRIGHT

Quotes are the copyright of their authors.

Free graphics are from www.clker.com & free photos are from commons.wikimedia.org unless otherwise credited.

This document is free to copy, republish and distribute, but only 'as is'. It is free to quote from at length.

All Canberra Forerunners' documents are licensed under

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License

(Readers will need to look up for themselves any scriptures alluded to in this document)