

The Speech in John 1:1

In the beginning was the Speech,
and the Speech was with God,
and the Speech was God.

The UPDV Updated Bible Version translates 'the Word' in John 1:1 as 'the Speech'.¹ The reason for this is to restore the original meaning of what has generally been translated as 'the Word'.

The translation of 'Word' or 'Speech' in John 1:1 is based on an Aramaic word (מלתא) which is broader than the meaning of 'Word'. Although it can mean either 'Word' or 'Speech', here 'Speech' is more accurate.

The Difference in the Dictionary

The translation of 'Speech' instead of 'Word' is significant in meaning. Compare these definitions in Webster's Dictionary² (emphasis added):

SPEECH:

The expression of ideas and thoughts by means of articulate vocal sounds, or the faculty of thus expressing ideas and thoughts.

WORD:

A unit of language, consisting of one or more spoken sounds or their written representation, that functions as a principal carrier of meaning.

Note the phrase in the definition above for 'speech': the faculty of thus expressing ideas and thoughts. So, on reflection, 'the Word' actually limits the meaning of John 1:1. Certainly, 'Word' is a way or element of expressing oneself, but 'Speech' goes beyond that. And by using 'Speech', it can still mean 'Word' — and much more.

¹ This change started with version 2.06 released April 2, 2005. The previous UPDV Version 2.05 read: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 1999 Random House, Inc.

The Pulpit Commentary

The Pulpit Commentary, a relatively well known and widely used commentary, also discusses these different meanings:

The New Testament writers never use the term Λογος³ to denote “reason,” or “thought,” or “self-consciousness,” but always denote by it “speech,” “utterance,” or “word”—the forthcoming, the clothing of thought, the manifestation of reason or purpose, but neither the “thought,” nor the “reason,” nor the “purpose” itself.⁴

Note the three general meanings: 'speech', 'utterance', or 'word'.

Writings of Aphrahat in the Fourth Century

There are also some early writings that discuss this subject. One example is a quotation from Aphrahat who was a fourth century Christian writer. Although he wrote in the fourth century, his writings were not recently published until 1869.⁵ His writings are important as they are written in Syriac, a type of Aramaic, which is similar to how the book of John was likely written originally. Below is an excerpt from a book⁶ which discusses Aphrahat's writings. In particular, an early discussion surfaces about the different meanings attached to John 1:1.

Before we leave this verse we should say a few words with regard to the way in which Aphrahat refers to it. In passage *a* our author writes just before his quotation of John 1,1, 'Christ is also the Word(ܡܕܒܪܐ) and the Speech(ܡܝܨܘܪܐ) of the Lord'. In the second passage, *b*, we hear Aphrahat say: 'And the Saying(ܡܝܨܘܪܐ) which is sent(Ms.A:+ to them)through his Messiah, who is his Word(ܡܕܒܪܐ) and his Saying(ܡܝܨܘܪܐ)'. And ultimately, in *c*, the text of our verse is cited with this remarkable wording: 'In the beginning the Voice was, which is the Word'(ܚܘܒܐ ܐܘܪܐ ܕܡܕܒܪܐ ܕܘܚܘܒܐ))²⁹.

It is to be noted that, in contrast to Mar Ephraem, Aphrahat could use all these synonyms as if they were interchangeable³⁰. Christ is the *Saying* (or: *Vocable*) - a term known from the *Odes of Solomon*³¹ - and the *Speech* (or perhaps: *Homily*) - a designation that may have been used in Bardesanite circles³² - or the *Voice* - a name which Mar Ephraem wants to reject³³ - and then finally, the *Word*³⁴.

From this discussion, it can be seen how 'Word' became a later interpretation of the other earlier meanings which included 'Speech'.

³ 'Λογος' is the Greek word 'logos' for what is being referred to as 'Word' or 'Speech':

⁴ The Pulpit Commentary: St. John Vol. I, ed. H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004.

⁵ W. Wright, The Homilies of Aphraates, the Persian Sage, edited from Syriac Manuscripts of the fifth and sixth Century in the British Museum, London, 1869.

⁶ T. Baarda, The Gospel Quotations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage, Amsterdam, 1975. Page 58.

Writings of Ephrem in the Fourth Century

In the last sentence of the excerpt in the book above about Aphrahat, another writer was introduced by the name of Ephrem. He was the one who rejected the meaning of 'the Voice'. Ephrem was an early Syriac writer who lived at about the same time as Aphrahat in the fourth century. The importance of these two writers is that they were some of the closest sources that we have who would have understood the meaning of the original Aramaic in John 1:1. The Syriac version of Ephrem's commentary which contained this verse was identified in 1957 and published in 1963.⁷ Ephrem wrote the following about this verse (emphasis added):

Do not understand it as an ordinary word, or reduce it to a voice. For it was not a voice that was in the beginning, since, before it sounded, [a voice] does not exist, and after it is sounded it does not exist. Therefore it was not a voice which was the likeness of his Father, nor was it the Father's voice, but his image.⁸

Old Testament Background

It is also possible that the underlying word in Aramaic in John 1:1 was originally 'Memra' (ממרא). This would match the extensive use in some of the Targums (Aramaic translations of the Old Testament). The significance of this is that John may have used his understanding of this term from the Targum when he wrote in John 1:1, 'In the beginning was the Speech...'.⁹

In reference to the use of 'Memra' in the Targums, J.W. Etheridge states:

... it seems, I repeat, impossible to restrict the signification of the epithet in question to a mere figurative personification, and not to perceive that St. John, when he wrote the first verses of his Gospel, communicated to the Gentile churches a mystery of the truth which had long been held sacred by the ancient people of God.⁹

Holding a similar view is Martin McNamara who says:

...it is legitimate to assume that John is very much under the influence of the targums in the formulation of his doctrine of the Logos.¹⁰

⁷ L. Leloir, Commentaire de l'evangile concordant. Texte syriaque (MS Chester Beatty 709). Chester Beatty Monograph Series 8, Dublin, 1963.

⁸ Carmel McCarthy, Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1993, 2000. Page 41.

⁹ J.W. Etheridge, M.A. The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee. KTAV Publishing House, Inc. New York, 1968, first published 1862, pages 19-20.

¹⁰ Martin McNamara, Targum and Testament. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1972, page 104.

In understanding John 1:1, it is also important to differentiate between the meaning of the 'Logos' of Greek Philosophy and the 'Memra' of the Old Testament. John Gill in his 'Exposition of the Entire Bible' at John 1:1 indicates that the meaning of John 1:1 is based on the meaning of 'Memra' from the Targums rather than from the writings of Plato or his followers. Gill further states that it is much more probable that Plato got his idea of the 'Logos' from the 'Memra' of the Old Testament, rather than supposing that John's ideas in John 1:1 were derived from Plato.

Summary

Today, with the support of these early writings some of which recently became available, the translation of John 1:1 can be determined more accurately.¹¹ Aphrahat established a range of meanings which includes 'word', 'voice', and 'speech'. But Ephrem rejects the ordinary meaning of both 'word' and 'voice' as too narrow. However, 'speech' is the broadest and brings out the best meaning. While voice and word can be part of speech, speech is much more.

We are also able to better understand the meaning of 'Speech' in John 1:1 by reviewing the use of 'Memra' in the Old Testament. It is this very usage that John likely had in mind when he wrote his Gospel.

Indicating the Use of 'Memra' in the UPDV Bible

In order to show where 'Memra' is used in the Old Testament, the corresponding English translation in the UPDV Bible has been underlined. For example, in Genesis 1:3, the Targum reads, 'And the Memra of the Lord said'. Our present version reads, 'And God said'. Accordingly, 'God' in Genesis 1:3 in this translation has been underlined. This shows the corresponding use of 'Memra' in the Targum. This also shows a possible relationship between 'God' of Genesis 1:3 to the 'Speech' of John 1:1. The 'Speech' of John 1:1 is also underlined since it is likely to have been originally derived from 'Memra' in the Targum.

If the word 'I' is underlined, the verb next to it will also be underlined to make it easier to notice.

In Genesis 1:3, 7, 9, 11, 15, 24, and 30, the last phrase of the verse is underlined to show the additional phrase 'according to the decree of his Memra' or 'according to his Memra' which appears at the end of the verse in the Targum. In Genesis 1:3 the Targum reads, 'and there was light according to the decree of his Memra'. The rest of the verses listed above read in the Targum, 'and it was so according to his Memra.'

The following are the instances where underlining has taken place to show an underlying use of 'Memra' in the Old Testament as well as the possible use of the same word in New Testament (parenthesis indicate the number of times 'Memra' appears in a verse if more than once):

¹¹ 50-150 years is relatively recent in the transmission of the New Testament.

John

1:1 (3 times), 1:14.

Genesis

1:3(2),4,5,6,7,8,9(2),10,11(2),15,16,20,22,24(2),25,27,28,30; 2:2; 3:8,10; 4:26; 8:20;
9:12,13,15,16,17; 12:7(2),8(2); 13:4,14,18; 14:19,22; 15:1,6; 16:13; 17:1,3,7,8,11; 18:1,17,19;
19:24; 20:3,6,13; 21:33; 22:16,18; 24:1,3; 26:3,5,25; 28:15(2); 29:31; 30:22; 31:3,5; 35:1; 46:4;
49:25.

Exodus

3:4,8,12(2),17; 4:12,15; 5:23; 6:3,7; 8:22; 10:10; 11:4; 12:12,23; 13:21; 14:30,31; 15:2,25,26;
17:1,6; 18:4; 19:5,9,20; 20:24; 23:22; 25:22; 29:43,45; 30:6,36; 31:17; 32:13; 34:5.

Leviticus

8:35; 9:4; 16:2; 18:30; 20:23; 22:9; 24:12; 26:11,12,30,46.

Numbers

3:16,39,51; 4:37,41,45,49; 9:18(2),19,20(2),23(4); 10:13,29; 11:17,20,21; 13:3;
14:9,11,14,22,41; 17:4; 20:12,24; 21:5; 22:9,12,18,20; 23:3,4,16,21; 24:4,13,16; 27:14; 33:2,38;
36:5.

Deuteronomy

1:26,32,43; 2:7; 4:30,33,36; 5:5,23; 8:20; 9:23(2); 13:4,18; 15:5; 18:19; 20:1; 26:14,17; 27:10;
28:1,2,15,45,62; 30:2,8,10,20; 31:8,23; 32:51; 34:5.

Psalms

2:12; 5:11(2); 7:1,8; 9:2,7,9,10; 11:1; 14:5; 16:1; 21:7; 22:4,5; 23:4; 25:2,3,20; 26:1; 27:1,10;
28:6,7; 31:1,6,14,24; 32:11; 33:21; 34:2,8,22; 35:9; 37:3,5,9,22,34,40; 40:3,16; 41:3; 52:7;
55:16; 56:4,10(2),11; 57:1; 62:8; 63:4,6,11; 64:10; 66:6; 68:11,16,33; 70:4; 71:1,6; 81:8,11;
84:5,12; 85:6,12; 89:24; 91:2,14; 95:7; 97:12; 104:34; 106:23,25; 107:25; 110:1,2; 112:7; 114:3;
115:9,10,11,12,14; 116:7; 118:26; 121:7; 124:2,8; 125:1; 135:14; 141:8; 143:8,9; 144:2.

Isaiah

1:20; 5:24; 6:8; 8:5,14; 9:7; 10:17,20; 12:2; 17:7; 21:17; 22:25; 25:8,9; 26:3,4; 28:23; 29:19(2);
30:11; 31:1; 32:9; 33:2; 37:32,35; 40:5; 41:10,13,14,16; 43:5; 44:24; 45:12,17,22,24,25; 46:3,12;
48:3,12,16; 49:1,5; 51:1,4,5,7; 55:2,3; 57:13; 58:14; 59:17; 60:9; 61:10; 62:2; 63:8; 66:6; 66:13.

'Memra' has only been noted in Genesis through Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Isaiah in the Old Testament of the UPDV Bible. 'Memra' is present elsewhere in the Targums. However, the reason for its use in these other places often seems to be for other purposes such as avoiding the use of God's name directly in negative contexts. However, the primary reason for indicating 'Memra' in this Bible is to show the possible background to John 1:1. Accordingly, 'Memra' is only noted in the books where it is reasonably associated with John's use.

Various Targums were consulted for the purpose of determining the use of 'Memra'. Only some of the instances of 'Memra' were included. Deciding which ones to include depended on factors such as: which Targums contained the reading, patterns of use, and the context.

In the Targum, the underlying phrase is often 'the Memra of the Lord' or similar which is substituted for God. If there is a phrase such as 'the name of the Memra of the Lord, the Everlasting God' (or similar), it has not been determined if the part after the comma (the Everlasting God) refers back to either 'Memra' or 'Lord' or both.

In some cases, there is not an exact one to one correspondence in the Hebrew Old Testament for 'Memra' in the Targum. In such cases, if a similar underlying word or phrase could be determined, it was underlined; otherwise, no underlining was done.

For further background on the use of 'Memra', see: 'The Idea of Intermediation in Jewish Theology. A Note on Memra and Shekinah. G. H. Box. The Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol 23, No. 2 (Oct. 1932), pages 103-119'. Also see: 'The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John. Daniel Boyarin. Harvard Theological Review 94:3 (2001), pages 243-284'.

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