

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(ܡܘܨܘܪܐ) which is sent(Ms.A:+ to them)through his Messiah, who is his Word(ܡܕܒܪܐ) and his Saying(ܡܘܨܘܪܐ)'. 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'(ܡܘܨܘܪܐ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܡܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ))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 'the Word' became a later interpretation of the other earlier meanings which included 'the 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

Conclusion

Today, with the support of these early writings which recently became available, the translation of John 1:1 can be determined more accurately.⁹ 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.

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