

Notes on John 1 : 1 – 5; Hebrews 1 : 1 – 4  
‘The Word became flesh’

The problem of having a square one is that it is easy to assume that there must be a square two. However, this mosaic does not work in such a straightforward way. Instead, like the different coloured tiles found in a mosaic they jump from place to place. Our thinking about the Bible in this sermon is rooted in what John Walton wrote in ‘The Lost World of Scripture’ on p167. He writes: “An unparalleled turning point in the history of Western civilisation was two inventions: moveable type and the printing press. But much more than a mechanical revolution, the inventions produced a revolution in the culture of texts. Printed texts replaced manuscripts; fixed texts replaced fluid texts; reading replaced hearing; individualism replaced communalism; and so forth. It was a cosmic transformation that would sweep across Western civilisation. People under the influence of print culture would never conceive of texts the same way again, This new world has been dubbed the ‘Guttenberg Galaxy.’” What he is stressing here is the danger that we have all been trained to think, to understand and use the Bible according to the rules of the ‘Guttenberg Galaxy’. That is, we will treat the Bible only as a book and the limits of that goes with this, when the ‘strange new world within the Bible’ demands more of us.

This different perspective is one of the reasons for my using the metaphor of ‘Eat this book’. This provocative analogy is to help us think and live the four keys we looked at previously. The Bible is the Word of God, it is the Revelation of God, it is inspired by God and it is the Authority of God. These four keys guide how the Bible becomes part of who we are, as much as what we eat and drink we absorb into our bodies.

Genesis 1 states ‘In the beginning’, but in the beginning what was the Bible? This odd question reminds us that the book we hold in our hands was not the original form the ‘Word of God’ took. The original form was of spoken conversations God had with Abraham and Sarah, with Jacob, with Isaac and with Moses. These conversations were only in spoken, or oral form. Thus when Genesis 24:63 describes Isaac meditating it does not mean that he reading what was written as such, but he was remembering the testimony he’d been told by his father. The Patriarchs lived at a time, which describes how most people in the history of our world have passed on information, which was by speech. The spoken word was valued above anything that had been written because it was alive and reliable unlike that which had been written. To talk to someone who remembered the testimony made it vibrant and faith became something alive and immediate to the hearer. In this oral culture what was important was not the author but the authority someone gave to the words spoken. For example, the first five books of the Bible are often referred to as the books of Moses. This is not because it was believed that he had written them but that all of them were soaked in his authority he had in the nation. Many of these words are his, but not all of them. It is the same for the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. In 1 Samuel 25 it says that Samuel dies but

it is his authority that resonates throughout the rest of the telling of the story of David. The power of what was spoken was reinforced by the use of symbols. Thus for Abraham it is the promise of the land and a family that makes God's words memorable. For Moses, and then for Solomon, it was the gift of the Tabernacle and then the Temple. For David it was the gift of Kingship and a dynasty. This does not mean that there were no texts since, for example, Moses came down from Sinai carrying the Ten Commandments, or the Ten Words, written down on tablets but these texts were seen as complimenting, not replacing, the spoken word. Therefore, if the spoken word has such power and durability why then do we have a book and not a CD or an MP3 file?

The key reason for this is Babylon's destruction of the land, the Temple and of the King and Israel's being sent into Exile. In Exile, the power of the Babylonian imperial sword and culture threatened Israel's identity and vocation as the People of God and who their God was they believed in. The key weapon in this polemical war for the heart, mind and soul of Israel was the use of text. As Israel centred their life around the text, since they had neither land, Temple or King, so the power of the written word grew in their own self understanding. The power of the text is echoed in the New Testament, but yet also reworked through the spoken words of Jesus. In John 1:1 Jesus as the Word is now at the centre of all testimony, symbol and identity. This is why he was often in controversy with the Jewish leaders, he claimed to be not only the true interpreter of the Old Testament, but the true centre itself.

Jesus is still undermining the centrality of the written word. When he said 'You have heard it said, but I say unto you' we need to pay even closer attention to what Jesus is saying to us. In the light of Jesus we must ask, is the Bible the Word of God, is the Bible our authority and is the Bible our revelation of God and to all three we must answer a qualified 'No'. We dare to say this because Jesus himself claims to be the Word of God, and him alone. In this he claims that the Word continues to be that which is spoken and deeply personal and so the text, in this special sense, becomes the Word of God to us as the Spirit works in and through it in our lives. The authority of the Bible is not in itself but the authority of Jesus as the Son of God on which it stands. The Spirit uses the Bibles as the testimony of Jesus and it is to him alone who we obey. Finally, it is Jesus who is the true revelation of God, as in John 14:9 and 5:39-40, and it is by the work of the Spirit in and through the whole text do we come to know and love this God more and more.

In Jesus the Bible and Mosaic Discipleship intersect. By the power and presence of the Holy Spirit we are able to listen for the voice of Jesus and this is why we read it and listen to it explained that in both we may learn to become more like Jesus.