

Oops I Didn't Know

Article two in the series, "Why Emphasize Hebrew?"

While traveling in Quebec a few years ago I observed an interesting road sign. It read "Danger! Hommes au Travail." I knew enough French to know that Danger is spelled the same in both English and French, but pronounced differently. I knew that Hommes was the French word for men. Considering this, it appeared that this sign was giving a very troubling warning. Danger, Men giving birth. Now that really sounds dangerous. Truly, I didn't have this misunderstanding, I knew the real translation was, "Danger, Men at work," but the possibility was too fun to ignore.

In English the word *travail* means labor however it has been used almost exclusively as a woman in labor about to give birth. Francophones use *travail* as a general term for labor, like our word *work*. So making a literal word for word translation can produce mistakes. This propensity for error is especially likely if one language is archaic, (no longer in use) and much of the context and breadth of definition has been lost.

During the Carter administration Poland was in turmoil. Lech Walesa was leading a movement against the ruling communist party and President Carter supported the efforts of the Polish people to democratize. President Carter traveled to Poland to show his support for the preceding events. The door to Airforce One opened and the President appeared in the opening. He stood on the platform and made a short statement sharing his admiration for the Polish people. He said in perfect Polish, "I love the Polish people,"-- at least that is what he thought he said. The crowd looked stunned. He heard some gasp. What had gone wrong? His interpreter had assured him this would be the proper thing to say, but it did not bring about the expected cheers. It was discovered that the translator told him an older word for love. While it meant love 100 years before, it had taken on a more risqué meaning in later years and generally meant *lust*. To make matters worse the translator had used a feminine form of the word *people*, so the President's first words on Polish soil was, "I lust after Polish women." Oh my, what an opening statement!

A foreign language is not a code which merely has a different set of words for identical ideas to our own language. Each language has its own set of associations that make it unique and difficult for the translator. In Dry Bones Restoration Company's Biblical Research Techniques seminar we discuss "word buckets." Words are buckets in which we keep ideas. We analyze certain Hebrew words and their English equivalents by placing the ideas they contain in the proper word bucket.

When we look up a word in the English dictionary we do not expect to see only one definition. The multiple definitions sometimes can be quite diverse in meaning. Often the meanings are not even related. For example we will use the English word *board*; I nailed a *board* up to brace the wall, and I must meet with the *board* of directors. Both cases use the same pronunciation and spelling, yet their definitions are seemingly unrelated. It is easy to see how a foreigner could be confused by these two diverse meanings to the same word, however **you** probably have never been confused with their usage.

Our analysis of word buckets reveal that connections are gained and lost by translating a text from one language to another. For example the English word *cat* is easily translated to the Hebrew word *khatool*. In English we consider a lion a cat, yet the Hebrew word for lion is *Arri* and no one would consider using the word *Khatool* as an alternate possible description. So the association we have between a cat, lion, panther, and all other big “cats” cannot be explained by using the Hebrew word *khatool*. Considering this, translators must be careful in the translation process or they can misrepresent something.

Now for an example of how a text may change once we consider the language.

Matthew 19:24 states, “And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” (KJV)

One explanation is given that a small gate is the subject of the phrase, “eye of the needle.” This is derived from the Greek word ῥαφίς (*rhapsis*) meaning needle, yet also meaning a small gate in a walled city. Sermons are given regularly about the camel being required to get down on its knees in order to crawl through this gate. This analogy is well liked because we have a rich man on his knees crawling into the kingdom of God. Yet a close look at this explanation will reveal problems. Both Matthew and Mark use the Greek word *rhapsis*, but the critical text and the textus receptus disagree when the story is given by Luke. This means that many of the older manuscripts use the word βελόνης (*belonos*) rather than *rhapsis*. *Belonos* still means needle, but has no reference to the concept of gate. The use of two different words in the various books leads one to believe that the specific word *rhapsis* may not have been the defining factor of this verse.

Another explanation based on the Aramaic texts from the Peshitta states that in Bible times camel hair was used as a material for making ropes. Ships needed ropes to support the masts and move the sails. Yehoshua was speaking to His disciples when He made this statement. Many of them were fishermen and well acquainted with fishing equipment and boats. George Lamsa informs us that the Aramaic word *gamla* meaning camel also was used as a term for rope.¹ Evidently it had become an idiom for the rope used on boats which had been made from camel’s hair. This is like using the phrase “pig skin” for a football or sheep skin for a diploma. So in the Peshitta, the Aramaic version of the Scriptures, this phrase was depicting a totally impossible task of putting a thick rope through the eye of a sewing needle. Sewing needles in that day were made from the rib bones of small animals. If you think it is difficult to get a camel to crawl through a small city gate, you should try to thread a hole in a mouse rib with a rope 50 times its size. In Aramaic, it is even harder for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. We must keep in mind that the poorest people in the United States are in the top 20 percent of income when compared to the entire world. So this would include all of us, without regard to how poor we think we are.

It is interesting that several medieval **Greek** texts support the Aramaic interpretation. The Greek word *kamilos* means camel, but the Greek word *kamelos* means rope. Some medieval Greek texts

¹ Holy Bible from the Ancient Eastern Text, George M. Lamsa, HarperSanFrancisco p974

use the word *kamelos* rather than *kamilos* hinting that they agree with the Aramaic texts. However, we have no early manuscripts that use *kamelos* leading us to believe that it may have been manufactured by a copyist or that the copyist believed in Aramaic primacy.

A third opinion arises when going outside of the texts for an explanation. We have no early Hebrew manuscripts of the Apostolic writings, so we must rely on external texts to Scripture to develop an explanation. This is using social context as a part of our understanding to Scripture. This can be a useful technique for clarifying an ancient text. Some answers are revealed only after understanding the culture. In fact, the Greek explanation is one such explanation using both Greek language and Greek culture. However, the question should arise as to whether the New Testament was written in a Greek culture. Jonathan Went points out some Talmudic passages that suggest a Hebraic basis to this passage.

Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth, 55b states, “They do not show a man a palm tree of gold, nor an elephant going through the eye of a needle.”

Also Babylonian Talmud, Baba Mezi’a, 38b “...who can make an elephant pass through the eye of a needle.”

Neither of these passages use the exact phrase recorded in the synoptic Gospels yet they reveal that this is a Hebraic hyperbole used to express a very difficult situation. Jonathan continues to explain that Rabbinic interpretation shows how such an impossible situation can be overcome by God. Continuing to reference Talmudic passages, Jonathan shows that Midrash Rabbah on the Song of Songs uses a similar phrase to reveal the capability of God to accomplish impossible tasks.

“The Holy One said, open for me a door as big as a needle’s eye and I will open for you a door through which may enter tents and camels.”²

In this passage hyperbole is used to show the majestic power and grace of God. The difficulty is reversed to show how we only need to give Him a very small opening in order for Him to accomplish a mighty task.

We now see that the language of origin, or the thinking of the writer could make a considerable difference in an explanation of the text. In the Greek explanation, salvation for the wealthy is based solely on the actions of the individual humbling himself before God. In the Aramaic, salvation for the wealthy would require him to become unraveled, or lose the strength of his combined wealth. The explanation from the Hebrew allows us to recognize that this is an exaggeration to make a specific point. An exaggeration is not to be taken as a literal impossibility, only that wealth is a strong tie that could draw one away from God. These three examples all focus on the pull of riches. Each express somewhat the same general idea from their language, however, there are certain nuances that are picked up from each language. The associations may or may not be the intent of the original text. The

² Midrash Rabbah, The song of Songs, 5:3: cf. Pesiqta R., 15. Friedmann, p.70a; soncino Zohar, vayikra 3, p95a

above example is not to elevate one interpretation over the other, rather to show the variance that appears as a result of linguistic differences. That example does not necessarily change the outcome for the reader in English. However there are several examples where the meaning of the text is completely changed depending on how you associate the words in your language.

In Luke 14 we read about a seemingly mundane Sabbath meal turned into a lesson for a local Rabbi. The opening verse sets the stage for a lesson.

^{NKJ} **Luke 14:1** Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely.

In English this clearly lets us know that Yehoshua was invited out to lunch by a fairly well known Rabbi, since he is referred to as one of the rulers of the Pharisees. However if we take this back to Hebrew several things change. In the century before Messiah two religious schools were established in Jerusalem. They were equivalent to a doctorate school of theology and their founders were considered some of the greatest minds of the era in Jewish practice. The two leaders were Hillel and Shammai. These leaders approached the law differently and created much debate as to how the Jew was to behave under certain circumstances.

Hillel was very lenient in his interpretation of the law and was described as teaching the “spirit of the law.” Shammai was considered a stickler for every detail of the law and was described as teaching the “letter of the law.”³ In reading the perspective that Yehoshua presents in the gospels, it is evident that He sided predominantly with Hillel. Hillel and Shammai shared in the leadership of the Sanhedrin. Hillel was president first and Shammai was second in command, however Hillel died in 20 AD and Shammai took over the position of president.

These two leaders each had their perspective schools named after them. So the names of the two schools were Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. Most of you would assume that Beit must mean school and truly with this usage it could be translated in that fashion. However a more literal translation would be house. Both schools continued long after the death of their founders. The leadership of the school of Hillel fell to his son Shimon (Simon), but Shimon soon fell ill and died. Simon’s son Gamliel then succeeded Shimon. Paul is revealed in the New Testament as a student of Gamliel, the grandson of Hillel.⁴ Gamliel had taken over the leadership of the school of Hillel as its third Nasi, (principal).

³ Considering these terms were used prior to Paul’s writings and Paul was a student of the school of Hillel, it is probable that this was the topic of Romans 7. ^{NKJ} **Romans 7:6** But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not *in* the oldness of the letter.

⁴ ^{NKJ} **Acts 22:3** "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today." Gamliel and Gamaliel are the same person but are spelled differently since one is a transliteration from Hebrew and the other from Greek.

With just this small piece of historical knowledge and connecting the Greek texts to the Hebrew we recognize a change in the Luke passage. See if you read it the way I do now when you review the passage.

^{NKJ} **Luke 14:1** Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely.

Notice this says he went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees. Could this have been a religious school of the Pharisees? Shammai continued to rule the Sanhedrin until 30AD, about the time of Yehoshua's ministry. Hillel had already died and by this time Gamliel had probably taken over his school. Yet Shammai may have still been the president of the Sanhedrin and running his school in Jerusalem. Let us look at the surrounding texts to see if this suggestion is plausible.

^{NKJ} **Luke 13:33** "Nevertheless I must journey today, tomorrow, and the *day* following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem.

In the previous verses we discover that Yehoshua was traveling toward Jerusalem teaching in the villages as he continued. After this series of teaching he stops at this house. Then in the verses following it is revealed the remainder of the guests.

^{NKJ} **Luke 14:3** And Jesus, answering, spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

Here we find that along with the ruler, there were lawyers who interpreted the commandments. Let us look at a definition of the Greek word translated as lawyer.

3544 νομικός nomikos {nom-ik-os'}

Meaning: 1) pertaining to the law, one learned in the law 2) in the NT an interpreter and teacher of the Mosaic law

This is precisely what you should expect to find in a Jewish religious school run by the president of the Sanhedrin, teachers and interpreters of the Mosaic law. So I conclude that Yehoshua had walked into Beit Shammai on His first Sabbath in Jerusalem. I choose Beit Shammai over Beit Hillel because it would not have been an issue to heal on the Sabbath in Beit Hillel. That would have been well within the "spirit of the law." He was setting up the teachers and was forcing them to face the inhumaneness of their teaching. He knew their decision concerning whether he could heal on the Sabbath, but they did not want to admit it when he showed up. It would make them look bad, real bad.

Hopefully this enables us to discern that it is important to have a linguistic paradigm that realistically fits the times of the Apostolic writings. Again when we review the Hebraic origin of the text it reveals that we are missing much of the story. In the next article we will discover that it is helpful to understand some of the methods taught in the school of Hillel. The Apostolic Writings did not arise

in solitude. They were written in a thriving Jewish culture and used the information and methods of that culture as a springboard to present Messiah.

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Dry Bones Restoration Company is a ministry devoted to teaching methods of extracting the Hebraic origin from the New Testament and making strong connections to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. We teach a course in methods of research and exegesis called "Biblical Research Techniques," or a less stuffy title, "Bible Detectives." These seminars are available for congregations and study groups wishing to learn how to make such connections.

Frank Houtz, founder of Dry Bones Restoration Company, is also an author and has written several books including a book on the Sabbath designed to help new Sabbath keepers be equipped with good answers as to why the New Testament did not end Sabbath keeping. Other books and booklets published by Dry Bones Restoration Company and written by Frank Houtz include, "Authority," "Machanayim-The Two Camps of Israel," "Episunagoge-A Study on the Assembly," "Evil Ain't All Bad," "A Date With the Lamb," "Adoption-From an Ancient Perspective," "A Frank Discussion of God's Law," and "Swords of Truth-Conflict Among Brethren Defending the Crown."

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