

Lost in Translation

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Part 1

לְכֵן חִכּוֹלִי נְאֻם־יְהוָה לְיוֹם קוֹמִי לְעֵד כִּי מִשְׁפָּטִי לְאַסֹּף גּוֹיִם לְקַבְּצֵי מַמְלָכוֹת לְשַׁפֵּר עָלֵיהֶם זַעֲמִי
כָּל חֲרוֹן אַפִּי כִּי בָאֵשׁ קִנְאַתִּי תֹאכַל כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: כִּי־אֲז אֶהַפֵּר אֶל־עַמִּים שְׁפָה בְרוּרָה לְקַרֵּא כָל־ם
בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה לְעַבְדוֹ שְׂכָם אֶחָד:

If you can read this without the aid of a Hebrew dictionary, good for you. I think every Christian should learn some Hebrew. My guess, however, would be that many (not all) of you can't. I, myself, can only read bits and pieces of it.

So, for those of you can't read it (those who can, imagine), what does this mean to you? Probably not much. It's not written in your language. If we can't understand the language, then we can't understand the text. This presents a problem with reading the Scriptures as they were written in Hebrew and Greek.

So, the solution is learn Hebrew Greek and then we're good, right? Not exactly. Most of you speak English pretty fluently, I assume (if not, then I have to wonder how you've gotten this far). Suppose you heard the following:

"Hmm...should I go for the 3 CCD or 1 CCD...or maybe a CMOS sensor would work. This one has aperture priority, but that one has a live histogram...choices, choices..."

or

"To take the derivative of a variable raised to the nth power, multiply the variable by n and subtract one from the exponent"

You understood both of those perfectly, right? Even if you did, I'm sure you know people whose eyes would glaze over if you tried to explain the inner workings of a camera or how to do calculus. There's so much jargon, that computers, sciences, etc. could be said to have their own sub-languages. The word "heat" to a common person means something totally different than to a scientist. The word "eschatology" means nothing to someone who hasn't looked into theology at all.

It gets even worse than that. Every person has his own unique language shaped by his experience. An excellent example of this would be the word "christian." Someone who is around people who call themselves Christians but act just like the world--that someone is probably going to have a negative view of the word "christian." Someone like me who has spent most of his time around christians who love their neighbor, etc. is going to have a more positive view of the word. And then there are the millions of definitions of what it means to be a christian (Do you have to be baptized? Is there such a thing as a worldly christians? etc.).

Let me back up a bit, because technically the idea that everyone has their own unique language is only partly true. Another way to think of it is that there is a unique language between any two people. Language is about communicating--it takes two. For example, if I said "I've decided to become a

penguin," a few of you would know what I mean because that is in the vocabulary between us. Most of you would probably be scratching your heads, however. That is because it is not in the vocabulary between us. Vocabulary is built by experience; shared vocabulary is built by shared experience. Another example: while I will say "law" and "Jesus" to one person, I'll say "Torah" and "Yeshua" to another--different vocabularies for different relationships.

Miscommunication happens often. When there is a lack of shared experience, one person will assume a meaning other than what the other person intended. This is when the former theory applies more--we each have our own vocabulary. But as we get to know someone, we develop a vocabulary for speaking to that specific person. Here, the latter theory begins to show.

Now if you're a bit lost in all this theory, that's ok. Let me try to bring it home with an example. In Haggai 2:23, God calls Zerubbabel His "signet ring." Now one could go into what a signet ring is and probably find lots of good info, but I want to focus on something specific. This language of a signet ring meant something to Zerubbabel that it wouldn't have meant to anyone else. Zerubbabel's grandfather, Coniah, was cursed because of his sin. According to Jeremiah 22:24, Coniah was like a signet ring tore off. By using the language of the signet ring, God was telling Zerubbabel that the curse was over--his family had been restored to God. God used specific language that only Zerubbabel could truly grasp.

Before you can understand the Bible, you must understand the language it was written in. Sola Scriptura ("Scripture Alone") is false (Abraham didn't have any Scriptura). We can't use the Bible alone--we must also have the language as a foundation. The reason we have so many different interpretations of Scripture is because we all speak a different language.

But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for **they know his voice.**

(John 10:2-4 ESV)

If we do not know the voice of the Shepherd, we will not understand His instructions. We must learn to speak His language, to recognize His voice. To some extent we can do that. I can point to times in my life and say "God spoke to me there." But to a large extent, I think we are missing something. There's so much strife and so many divisions among God's children--everyone saying "I'm right" and "you're wrong." There's something wrong with this picture. So many of us honestly searching for just basic things and we come back more confused than before. It should be simple--like a Father's instructions to his child. But we don't understand. We speak a foreign language.

There is hope:

"Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed. **For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.**

(Zephaniah 3:8-9 ESV)

This is the passage I quoted in Hebrew above. The day is coming (and I believe now is) when our Father will return to us the language of the Shepherd. Then there will be no more divisions. Then we will serve Him with one accord. So, pray that our Father would teach us His voice so that we might follow Him.

Part 2

In our quest to find the pure language of the Scriptures, we must turn back to Zephaniah 3:8-9. Zephaniah 3:8 is a very unique verse--it contains all 22 Hebrew letters including the 5 final forms (I first learned this from Rico, but I have confirmed everything here with my own research). Now, just how remarkable is this? In the Septuagint, all the Greek letters occur together in 31 verses. In the New Testament, the number is 2 verses. None of these are in the context of language. In the Hebrew Old and New Testaments, Zephaniah 3:8 is the ONLY verse to contain all the Hebrew letters. And it occurs right before Zephaniah 3:9

"For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.
(Zephaniah 3:9 ESV)

Do you think maybe the pure speech has something to do with the Hebrew language?

Let's look at another Bible story. In Genesis 11, the people of the earth come together to build the Tower of Babel--I'm sure you're familiar with this story. God confused the languages, so now instead of one language, we have seventy (according to Jewish tradition). This is the result of Babel (which in Hebrew is the same as Babylon). What do the Prophet tell us about Babylon?

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, "The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!"
(Isaiah 48:20 ESV)

Revelation echoes this, telling us to "come out of her" (Rev. 18:4). What are we to come out of? Confusion. Mixing. Babel means "confusion by mixing." Where did the confusion begin? In the language. We are being called out of the confusion of the languages, back to a pure tongue.

I believe that Hebrew is that pure language. It is the only language that has been revived from being dead. It is the language of our Scriptures (indeed, according to Judaism, only books originally written in Hebrew are eligible to make it into the canon). It is the language of the chosen people. But we cannot go into Hebrew with our Babylonian mindset. We cannot build a Hebrew vocabulary on top of our English language. We must replace the foundation entirely.

Remember, language is built on experience. Experience is something you see, hear, feel, taste, smell. It is concrete--tangible. Language is not. Words are like vessels made to transport experience to another person. The words themselves are abstract, but the experience they convey should be concrete. For example, if I say "chair," the word itself is just a collection of strange symbols or sounds. But it creates

within your mind a picture of a chair--perhaps a brown wooden chair, or a reclining chair, or whatever picture your mind associates with that word. If I say "glory," you might get a picture of the Grand Canyon or the sun. For "honor," an elder or someone bowing down before a king. These last two are called abstract words. We still connect them to pictures in our minds, but the pictures are not nearly as defined as with concrete words. I don't really know what you think of when I say "honor." But I can be pretty sure of what you will think of when I say "chair" (details aside). The goal of communication of is to convey an idea accurately to another--abstract words hinder this because you don't know what is being received. A little abstractness is necessary because it gives flexibility to the language. But too much abstractness creates confusion--babel.

Hebrew is different from English in that every letter has a meaning--a picture. Together, the meanings of the letters form the meanings of words. For example, the Hebrew word for father is spelled Alef, Bet. Alef is a picture of an ox. The ox was probably the strongest domestic animal in Israel. Bet is a picture of a house. The house defines the boundaries of the family. Together you have the ox of the house, the strength of the family. The word is permanently connected to everyday objects. Another example is the Hebrew word for holy: Kadosh--Qof, Dalet, Shin. Qof means the back of the head--what is behind or what follows. Dalet is a door--more literally something that swings or moves back and forth. Shin is teeth--instruments for crushing. Dalet and Shin together give you the up and down motion of crushing used in threshing. Add Qof and you get what follows the threshing. What follows the threshing? The wheat is **separated** from the chaff. See how an abstract word has been made concrete taking it back to the pictures? Jeff Benner has attempted to go through do this for most of the Hebrew words in the Bible and has published a dictionary.

Remember that shared meaning comes from shared experience. We are so far removed from the Hebrew culture that a lot of the pictures mean very little to us. How many of you have been to a threshing floor? I haven't. Without that experience we cannot fully capture the meaning of kadosh. How many of you have killed your own food? How can we truly understand sacrifice without that experience? In a Hebrew culture, the shepherd would know the names and personalities of every sheep--each one unique. Today we get our meat off a shelf from an animal that never even had a name.

I said earlier that I believe Hebrew is the pure language. That is only partly true. I believe it is the closest we have to the pure language. For, the pure language is not a language of words and symbols. It's a language of action, of doing. We are to be **doers** of the word, not merely hearers of the word (Rom. 2:13). 1 Peter 3:1 talks about winning over others **without a word** by our conduct. You cannot learn this language simply by studying. You have to experience it--to do it. They say actions speak louder than words. I say it's because the pure language is a language of action.

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