

Troubles with Greek

With the onset of computer Bible programs, Greek and Hebrew language helps are often only a click away. This makes it easier than ever before to research words in the original languages and to use the results of that research. More and more we are hearing “the Greek says” in discussion of biblical matters. What do we make of all the Greek and Hebrew being thrown around these days? Instead of just saying “It’s Greek to me” let us think about using original language in our study of the Bible.

First, let us dispense with the common idea that there is a “hidden” New Testament available only to those who know Greek. The way some talk, it sounds as if reading the New Testament in Greek reveals new meanings and understanding the “common man” will never see. Few would own up to this directly, I suspect, but endless talk about “Greek this” and “Hebrew that” leaves one feeling that way, doesn’t it? I must confess that I certainly believed such was true. In college, I elected to leave behind being a “commoner,” and learn New Testament Greek. I couldn’t wait to see all that new stuff in the Greek Bible! After a year of Greek, the class’s last project was to translate the first chapter of 1 John. When I had completed my translating I found, to my amazement, that my chapter read almost exactly like the chapter in my New King James Version! There were no significant differences (which is why I got an “A.” If there had been differences it would have indicated I had made an error!) This is certainly not to say there is no place for original language study, or for defining words from Greek or Hebrew. It is to emphatically say that to act as if there is some “hidden” meaning in the Bible that lies beneath the English text, available only to the educated elite, is dead wrong. Anything we do or say that gives such an impression does a grave disservice to the Bible and its readers. An ordinary person can become a fine student of the Word -- understanding even its deep and difficult subjects -- without knowing original languages. There are those that strongly imply “If you want to really know what the Bible says you must learn Greek.” Nonsense!

Second, a lot of what is done with original languages today is often misguided and wrong. Ever heard a preacher or teacher read a verse from a regular English translation, then announce that Thayer gives five definitions for one of the words in the verse, and that, sadly, the translators missed it this time? The pseudo-scholar announces the word of his choice, and explains at length how this changes the passage’s meaning. The audience is left to marvel at such depth and scholarship. It may sound impressive but rarely is Bible translation so simple. There is much more to determining word choice than simply looking up a word in a dictionary, examining the definitions and plugging one in that we like (or that makes the point we want). When inspired Bible writers employ a certain term, there is a great deal more than just knowing the definition of that word to determine its meaning. Translators must grapple with word order, the flow of thought, and the word choices of the author, themes, syntax, grammar and context. To do that properly one needs years of training and an extraordinary level of Greek knowledge far beyond what one gets from reading a lexicon. We need to be very, very careful about the conclusions we draw about original languages. Pulling words out of a Greek dictionary and plugging them directly into the text of Scripture often is simply mistaken and may well result in wresting the Scriptures.

Finally, many of the authorities commonly cited are terribly dated. Strong’s, Vines and Thayer’s are the works most often cited by those beginning in Greek, but while these are very fine works, they have their limitations. James Strong and his team put together their fabulous concordance in the late 1800’s. Henry Thayer’s famous lexicon was published in 1890. W.E. Vine published his classic “Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words” in 1939. That does not mean these works are of no value by any means. It is to say, however, that these works were unable to take advantage of some enormously significant finds that have been made since their publication, like many papyri and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Yet sometimes these three are cited as if they are infallible, and the absolute last word. In short, they aren’t.

Where does all of this lead? One might conclude that the thing to do is throw away all the lexicons and dictionaries and just read an English Bible happily. That would be a terrible mistake. It has its place and role, but those with little experience with original languages need to be careful. If we are “improving” on the translation done by scholars with years and years of experience and education we ought to do so only after much study. Further, let’s not act as if the “common man” cannot really understand what the Bible means without the benefit of our ‘brilliant’

Greek skills. Perhaps even more important, let's not get sold on some theological point or doctrine made from faulty (but impressive sounding) arguments from original languages. H. Leo Boles was famous for saying, "If you can't prove it in the English, you can't prove it from the Greek." I believe many Greek scholars would heartily concur. I know of no point of New Testament doctrine that is established solely by relying on the knowledge of original languages.

Let us be thankful that we have such fine translations available to us, and thankful as well for good language tools. But let's be cautious using them, and when they are wielded by well-meaning amateurs, let's make sure we add a grain of salt to all that Greek we hear.

- by Mark Roberts (edited)

Distractions on the Road

Surely you've seen them - those drivers who are so busy talking or texting on their cell phones that they sit through a green light or ignore some other important traffic situation. We've even seen people talking on their cell phone AND eating a sandwich - all while driving the car!

Driving is a serious activity that demands our devoted attention. Things like cell phones and sandwiches tend to distract us, making driving even more dangerous. Published statistics clearly point out the dangers of distracted driving. When two or more such distractions are added together - watch out! An accident is sure to follow.

Now, make a spiritual application: Living life in this world is a very serious activity. It demands our undivided attention. The problem is that we too often allow ourselves to be distracted by the things of this world. When that happens, a spiritual accident is sure to follow.

And, we're not just talking about the sinful things that can distract us. Certainly, there are plenty of those. Wickedness abounds in our society and we are confronted with multiple temptations everyday. Constant vigilance is necessary. But, in addition to these things, there is the danger that we will get so busy with the non-sinful activities of our day-to-day lives that we might forget what our main pursuit is supposed to be. Our jobs, our families, our recreation and a host of other things can crowd God out of our lives.

Add two or three such distractions together and you are simply a spiritual accident looking for a place to happen. Be careful! Stay focused. *"Reach forth unto those things which are before"* and *"press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus"* (Phil. 3:13,14).

- by Greg Gwin