

# A Case for Biblical Languages

## Are Hebrew and Greek Optional or Indispensable?

by Enoch Okode

### Introduction

Many of us have heard the expression, "It's all Greek to me!" People use this expression when they face a puzzle, something they find too difficult to navigate through. It also means that Greek is no child's toy. I have seen students who give up on Hebrew and/or Greek even before they learn the first letter of the alphabet because of their attitude towards biblical languages. Perhaps, without disregarding the unrelenting labour that these languages demand, we need a change of attitude as well as a clear articulation of the necessity of these languages. We need an attitude that asserts that we can learn Hebrew without harm; we can study Greek without grief. These languages are essential to our interpretative task. The pertinent question is: What interpretative difference does it make to know Hebrew and Greek?<sup>1</sup> This question may be asked in support of or in opposition to the need for the knowledge of the original languages of the Bible. Our conviction throughout this article is that there are treasures that a minister of the Word of God can extract only if he is competent in Hebrew and Greek. Therefore knowing biblical languages is essential for exegetical accuracy and theological depth. We will first evaluate some of the objections or excuses people give for failure to seek competence in biblical languages.

### Objections to Studying Biblical Languages

#### 1. We have many good English and mother tongue translations.

Why study biblical languages when we have translations in many mother tongues in addition to excellent commentaries? On the surface this appears to be a pragmatic and valid reason for avoiding Hebrew and Greek. There are more than fifty English translations of the Bible. Many people have the Bible in their mother tongue. Thousands of good commentaries are published. So why should one spend time and money learning Hebrew and Greek? Although we will respond to this later, "It is precisely because there are so many excellent commentaries available today that the use of the biblical languages in preaching becomes more important, not less."<sup>2</sup> No translation or commentary can eliminate the need to study the Bible in the original languages.

#### 2. Bible college teachers need biblical languages, pastors don't.

Second, many people claim that Hebrew and Greek are for college professors, not church ministers. Some claim that spending so much time

---

<sup>1</sup> There are Aramaic portions of the Bible but this article focuses on Hebrew and Greek.

<sup>2</sup> S. Hafemann, "Why Use Biblical Languages in Preaching?" in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 3 (1999), pp. 86-89.

studying these languages renders a minister irrelevant to his congregation since he will hardly have time to keep in touch with the needs surrounding him. This objection contends that seeking to master biblical languages and applying them in one's ministry produces an exegete of the Word who has no time to exegete the culture. The argument is at best self-defeating. In the first place, it implies that college professors are detached from the realities on the ground; they inhabit the abstract world of the intricacies of the otherwise dead languages of the Bible. But if for the sake of argument we grant that the life of a professor is to some extent irrelevant to the workaday life of the parishioner, why would you allow such a professor to study biblical languages in order to teach Bible college students? Second, cultural exegesis cannot be divorced from the exegesis of the Word. In other words, competence in biblical languages should in the end produce an exegete with one foot in the Word and the other in the world as he seeks to carefully divide the timeless Word of God. The needs surrounding a preacher and teacher of the Word can be adequately addressed only if he is a faithful, obedient and diligent student of Scripture, which is the source of heavenly wisdom.

### **3. Those who study biblical languages don't use them after graduation.**

It is true that the majority of graduates from Bible schools never use Hebrew and Greek Bibles in their sermon preparation.<sup>3</sup> So why teach or take a course that seems irrelevant upon graduation? Moreover, one may argue that it does not take biblical languages in order to address the concerns and practical needs of the congregation. People are looking for something with immediate gratification, application, and relevance. This is one of the demands that modernity and post-modernity places on us. If the 'tools' at our disposal produce the desired results for the preacher, why invest in biblical languages? But learning biblical languages is a worthwhile long-term investment that requires diligence and discipline. The benefits accrued in this endeavor are immense and impact lives for God's kingdom. It is hard to maintain the centrality of the Word if we view biblical languages as a non-essential and optional extra. Similarly, if preachers don't invest in Hebrew and Greek, their hearers will be deprived of some of the treasures of the Word as well as the informed and informative exposition that they deserve.

#### *3.1 Graduates don't use biblical languages due to their lack of discipline.*

Graduates of theological education often fail to use biblical languages in their ministries for at least three reasons. First, they may lack discipline and diligence. Biblical languages, like other languages, are like flowers with a sweet scent, but in a drought they dry up and the scent disappears. It takes diligent and on-going study for one to gain competence and find delight in

---

<sup>3</sup> Some might object that knowledge of biblical languages does not make a preacher or teacher of the Word. This objection has some weight since a preacher or teacher is called, not merely trained. But a minister without such knowledge faces limitations and disadvantages. Mastery of these languages makes a minister more effective.

using biblical languages in the ministry. Any lapse after the end of a course in Greek or Hebrew is disastrous and regrettable. When I was in college I took more than twelve credit hours of Greek and six hours of Hebrew. However, for about three years after I graduated, I never consistently studied either of these languages. As would be expected, my Hebrew and Greek became shamefully rusty! When I went back to school I was required to take competency exams to demonstrate that I qualified for exegetical courses without necessarily beginning with elementary Hebrew and Greek. I did not need to wait for the results to find out that I had to repeat grammar courses. I paid dearly for failing to keep up my Hebrew and Greek. From that painful yet insightful experience, I vowed to always keep my languages fresh.

A.T. Robertson says that, “the chief reason why preachers do not get and do not keep up a fair and needful knowledge of the Greek New Testament is nothing less than carelessness, and even laziness in many cases. They can get along somehow without it, and so let it pass or let it drop.”<sup>4</sup> The same holds true for Hebrew. It takes commitment and consistency for one to be competent in biblical languages. Only a disciplined and diligent student of the Word and disciple of Christ can uncover the treasures of biblical languages.

### *3.2 Graduates don't use biblical languages because they don't KNOW them.*

Many graduates never learned the languages well enough to use them in ministry.<sup>5</sup> This problem is mainly due to curricula that fail to underscore the necessity of biblical languages. Many Evangelical and Protestant colleges and seminaries do not require biblical languages for graduation.<sup>6</sup> Some make these languages optional while others do not have them at all. In some situations students are required to take only a single course in one or both languages.<sup>7</sup> But one semester is not sufficient for practical use of biblical languages after graduation. In such cases the students get the impression that it does not take biblical languages for one to be an accurate exegete and a thorough textual expositor. We cannot delete Hebrew and Greek from our curricula if our goal is to train men and women who can faithfully divide the Word of God. H.G. Richardson is right to conclude that, “Hebrew [and Greek]

---

<sup>4</sup> A.T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament* (New York: Doran, 1923), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Credibility, Competence, and Confidence: The Necessity of Using Your Hebrew” in *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> See John D. Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2006), p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> It is a mistake to introduce students to ‘tools-approach’ after one semester of Hebrew and/or Greek. Tools are for experts who have gone through the required training. Without adequate training tools can be dangerous.

should, therefore, not only be a part of every seminary curriculum, but should be required for graduation.”<sup>8</sup>

### *3.3 Graduates don't see biblical languages as worth the work.*

Graduates fail to use biblical languages in sermon preparation because of the ugly chasm that sometimes exists between requirements to learn biblical languages and the vocational goals of the students. This occurs when biblical languages are taught without demonstrating to the students how these languages contribute to making a student into an effective minister of the Word. The student memorizes the vocabulary, learns paradigms, morphology, and syntax among others, but she has not been trained on how to use all this in her contextual preaching and teaching engagements. The question, “What is the payoff in learning biblical languages?” has not been properly addressed. This question must be answered so students can passionately embrace biblical languages. Robert Chisholm says this “involves learning how to do exegesis and then transforming one’s exegetical conclusions and observations into a relevant theological exposition of the text that is the backbone of a biblical, text-based sermon or lesson.”<sup>9</sup>

### *3.4 Graduates think biblical languages are for exceptionally gifted people.*

Another objection that I have often heard is that these languages are for the exceptionally gifted. It would be naïve for me to ignore the fact that we have linguists, people for whom learning languages seems as easy as breathing. Similarly, we have different gifts within the body of Christ; ergo, if my gifts have nothing to do with biblical languages, why bother? In response we need to note two points. First, gifts such as giving, administration, and encouragement among others do not necessarily require the knowledge of biblical languages in order for them to edify the body of Christ. Second, whoever raises this excuse should remember that our focus in this article is on those who have been called to preach and/or teach the Word. To argue that preaching and teaching the Word is for the exceptionally gifted saints is another way of saying that church ministry is for the exceptionally gifted and extraordinary men and women. Nothing can be further from the truth! The truth is that these languages are for the saints who are committed to thorough exegesis, who delight in informative and transformative exposition, and who are convinced that it takes hard work to be a successful minister of the Word.

## **Why are Hebrew and Greek Indispensable Rather than Optional?**

Let us now face our overriding question: Why are Hebrew and Greek indispensable rather than optional? In the next section we will discuss five ways in which the original languages contribute to accurate exegesis, informed exposition, and in-depth theology. The first point concerns meaning.

---

<sup>8</sup> H. G. Richardson, “The Use of Hebrew to a Minister” in *The Harvard Theological Review*, 2:1, (Jan., 1909), p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, “Credibility, Competence, and Confidence”, p. 9.

## 1. Meaning

We use language in order to convey meaning to others. Every speaker chooses particular words because they will best convey his intended message to the target audience. We, however, were not the primary target audience of the authors of the Bible; it is therefore our duty to seek to understand what they meant. Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic have different idioms and structures from our own languages. This means that we have to recognize that words are contextual, conventional and historically particular. Language grows and changes with time; today's translation may not be fit for the next generation of readers. In addition, what a person says in Hebrew may not be exhaustively expressed in another language since no language can provide a perfect rendering of the thoughts and ideas expressed in a that biblical language. In the words of Richardson, "No man can discover the real idea in the mind of the writer of a Hebrew [and Greek] sentence unless he has access to the language."<sup>10</sup>

Translations of Prov. 12:16 - 'ewil bayyôm yiwwāda' (אָוִיל בַּיּוֹם יוֹדַע כַּעֲסוֹ) - clearly illustrate this point. KJV renders it, "A fool's wrath is presently known"; LXX<sup>11</sup> says, "A fool declares his wrath the same day"; NAS says, "A fool's vexation is known at once"; NET says, "A fool's annoyance is known at once"; while RSV has, "The vexation of a fool is known at once." The word in contention in these translations is *bayyôm* – literally "in the day". KJV's rendering misses the immediacy of a fool's reaction. This translation may imply that a fool can hide his anger for a little while and vent it later or that his anger is something happening currently without reference to whatever and whenever it was triggered. Thus it is inaccurate to depend on KJV's rendering given how we use 'presently' today. While the other translations capture the suddenness of a fool's anger, they are all modified and less literal.

Similarly, words in different languages that may have a general correspondence to each other usually will not correspond in all respects. For instance, the word *yāda* (to know, יָדַע)<sup>12</sup> has different meanings in Hebrew, some of which correspond to the English meanings while others are alien to the latter. In Genesis 3:7, Adam and Eve 'knew' that they were naked after they had eaten from the forbidden tree. 'Know' as used in this verse means 'to realize, recognize, or observe', all of which correspond to the English usage. However, in Genesis 4:1 (see also 1 Kings 1:4) the same word is used to refer to sexual intercourse. Unless a reader understands that in Hebrew 'to know' also means having sexual intercourse, such passages as 1 Kings 1:4 may easily be misunderstood. Another common word in the Hebrew Bible is 'torah'

<sup>10</sup> H. G. Richardson, "The Use of Hebrew to a Minister", p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> LXX or The Septuagint is the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>12</sup> See F. Brown, et al, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), p. 393.

(תּוֹרָה), which is generally rendered ‘law’ in English. However, ‘law’ and ‘torah’ have different origins and even connotations so that what ‘law’ means to an English speaker is not necessarily what it means to a Hebrew speaker. In short, since the meaning of words is dynamic, conventional and historically particular, we cannot have a thorough understanding of a text unless we study it in the original language. Apart from meaning, another reason why we need to know the original languages is the availability of translations.

## 2. Translations

We have noted above that some people object to studying biblical languages because we have translations in English and in various mother tongues. It is argued that one can sufficiently understand the Bible by reading the available translations so studying the original languages is optional. But every translation is also an interpretation since in the translation process a translator has to make interpretive decisions. One’s agenda, perspective, context, and presuppositions factor into the kind of translation he ends up with. We may have an excellent translation, but it is still just that: a translation! There is no translation that accurately retains the best and finest sense of the original language; something is always lost in the process of making translational or interpretive decisions. There is no language that can render the unique touches of another. An Italian proverb says, “*Traduttore traditore*” meaning “*translators are traitors!*”<sup>13</sup> or “*translations are treacherous.*”<sup>14</sup>

The plurality of readings and translations attest to the fact that there is no perfect translation. Translators are fallen human beings who do not enjoy the apostolic (and prophetic) privilege of inspiration and infallibility. Consequently, they are liable to err and sometimes even miss the sense of an author due to human frailty. It necessarily follows that any exegete unacquainted with the original languages cannot have sufficient certainty with any text because he will be compelled to rely on another person’s interpretive decisions instead of making his own.<sup>15</sup>

Our argument here is not intended to erode or undermine confidence in the translations in our hands. Bible translators are committed to preserving the sacredness of the divine revelation so that they are very careful in their work. We can say with confidence that there is no faithful translator who intentionally distorts the intended meaning of any verse. Translators engage in painstaking effort. Kenneth Wuest aptly comments, “... to handle the Greek language and produce a translation which is expressive and yet strictly true to the original, is

<sup>13</sup> Moises Silva, *God, Language and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 134.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce. K. Waltke, “How I Changed My Mind About Teaching Hebrew (or Retained It)” in *Crux* 29:4 (1993), pp. 10-15.

<sup>15</sup> This does not imply that biblical interpretation is individualistic; we still have to interpret the Bible within and for the community of believers. We also need the wisdom and skills of others in this process.

no child's play."<sup>16</sup> However, anyone who knows more than one language and has interacted with people of different cultures and backgrounds will acknowledge the limitation of one language in rendering another. In other words, there is never an error-free translation. Moreover, translators are often presented with many possible ways of rendering a text, yet at the end of the day they have to settle for one option that seems best to them.<sup>17</sup> Most of the English translations do not provide us with all the possible ways of translating a particular word, phrase or clause.<sup>18</sup>

For the sake of illustration we will cite two texts. Consider how 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is rendered in different English translations:

vs.	NIV	NASB	RSV	KJV	JB
11	A woman should learn in <b>quietness</b> and full submission.	Let a woman <b>quietly</b> receive instruction with entire submissiveness.	Let a woman learn in <b>silence</b> with all submissiveness.	Let the woman learn in <b>silence</b> with all subjection.	During instruction, a woman should be <b>quiet</b> and respectful.
12	I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be <b>silent</b> .	But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain <b>quiet</b> .	I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep <b>silent</b> .	But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in <b>silence</b> .	I am not giving permission for a woman to teach or to tell a man what to do. A woman <i>ought not to speak</i> .

The Greek phrase in dispute here is *en hesuchia*, (ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ), "in quietness". The word *hesuchia* may be translated as 'silent, quiet, still, tranquil, and rest' among others. What sense does Paul have here? According to JB (especially v. 12) a woman is not permitted to speak. KJV and RSV follow the same rendering in both verses, while NIV follows it in v. 12. The word *hesuchia* occurs three times in 1 Timothy. There is no doubt that the first

<sup>16</sup> S. Kenneth Wuest, *Untranslatable Riches from the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1945), p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> For further details on Bible translation, see John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1974), pp. 19-313.

<sup>18</sup> Such a task is beyond their mandate. But even if they were to do that no one would want to carry the resultant voluminous Bible with him!

usage (1 Tim 2:2) is in reference to a quiet and well-ordered life. The other two occurrences are in 2:11-12. The wider context here is that of worship but with particular reference to teaching and learning. Paul uses two *en hesuchia* phrases adverbially to indicate the manner in which a woman should learn. Does Paul say that a woman should learn in verbal silence or in quietness? The “in silence” interpretation implies that a woman should be speechless in the teaching/learning context.<sup>19</sup> However, a careful examination shows that it is highly probable that Paul uses *en hesuchia* in reference to quietness rather than speechlessness.<sup>20</sup> Our intention here is simply illustrative, hence we cannot go into greater detail. If one does not know Greek she will not understand the many possible ways of rendering *hesuchia*, and hence be limited to what the translations provide. Knowing how to translate Greek or Hebrew also enables a preacher/teacher to choose and even recommend the best translation of a text to his hearers.<sup>21</sup>

In Ps 32:5, the psalmist uses the phrase ‘*awōn hattā’ū* (עוֹן הַטְּאָוֶן) which may be literally translated ‘the iniquity of my sin.’ NIV translates it as ‘the guilt of my sin’; KJV has ‘the iniquity of my sin’; LXX has ‘the ungodliness of my heart’; NAS has ‘the guilt of my sin’; while NET simply translates it as ‘my sins.’ What translation would you prefer? Examples of this nature are inexhaustible; the bottom line is that a proper interpretation of any text demands the knowledge of the original languages so that the exegete can make proper interpretive decisions, rather than letting others decide for him. Apart from meaning and translations theology also necessitates the study of the original languages.

### 3. Theology

We have repeatedly noted that the task of doing theology requires competence in biblical languages. A thorough exegesis should form the foundation for any theological stance if our theology is to be biblical rooted. No doubt our theological presuppositions influence our exegesis and our exegesis

<sup>19</sup> See also Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 112 and Douglas J. Moo, “1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance” in *Trinity Journal*, 1:1 (1980), pp. 62-83.

<sup>20</sup> Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (Peabody: Mass: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 178-9; W. D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles*, Vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), pp. 117-130; Philip B. Payne “Libertarian women in Ephesus: Response to D. J. Moo's article, ‘1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance’” in *Trinity Journal*, 2:2 (1981), pp. 169-197.

<sup>21</sup> Another example is Ephesians 2:1-7. In the Greek text, these verses form one long sentence. (Notice that the main statement of this text is “you...made alive.”) A literal translation of this text into English does not make sense; hence English translations break it down into several sentences. However, if one only has an English translation, he would be hardly able to identify the main statement. This is a case in which translators have to make necessary modifications in order to come up with a meaningful translation.



in turn informs and modifies our theology. But it is a lamentable mistake to study systematic or biblical theology without acquiring the skills and discipline necessary for understanding the source of that theology. Similarly, there are times when people subscribe to different theological declarations as a result of different interpretations of a text. When one is faced with a theological or doctrinal decision based on interpretation, one of the crucial tools is the knowledge of the original languages of Scripture.

For instance, Deut. 6:4 is traditionally rendered, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God; the LORD is one.” This translation assumes that Yahweh is essentially unitary while missing the fact that the Old Testament does not talk about how many is God. Certainly the Hebrew word *’ehād* (אֶחָד) means ‘one,’ but it can also mean ‘only’ or ‘alone.’ In this text, linguistic and contextual evidence make a unitary interpretation doubtful. It should be understood as “a cry of allegiance (“Our God is Yahweh, Yahweh alone”), not ontology, and the statement is about Yahweh, who manifests himself to Israel as her covenant God, not God in the abstract or in a metaphysical sense.”<sup>22</sup> Daniel Block concludes,

The Shema’ should not be taken out of context and interpreted as a great monotheistic confession. Moses had made that point in 4:35, 39 . . . . Nor is the issue in the broader context the nature of God in general or his integrity in particular – though the nature and integrity of his people is a very important concern. This is a cry of allegiance, an affirmation of covenant commitment in response to the question, “Who is the God of Israel?” The language of the Shema’ is “sloganesque” rather than prosaic: “Yahweh our God! Yahweh alone!” or “Our God is Yahweh, Yahweh alone!” This was to be the distinguishing mark of the Israelite people; they are those (and only those) who claim Yahweh alone as their God.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, though this verse is often used to support arguments for the unity of the Godhead, it is probable that that is not its correct interpretation. One needs the knowledge of Hebrew in order to understand the Shema’ as a cry of allegiance rather than a proclamation of the Trinity.

A preacher and teacher cannot adequately refute false teachings without the knowledge of biblical languages. Take, for example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ interpretation of John 1:1. They deny the deity of the Word, arguing that the translation should be: “the Word was a god.” The main reason that leads them to this translation is the absence of the Greek definite article (the) before the noun *theos* (θεός). But they fail to recognize that the absence of the

---

<sup>22</sup> This quotation is taken from Dr. Daniel I. Block’s *Old Testament Theology Lecture Notes*, Fall 2007, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel I. Block, “How Many Is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4-5” in *JETS* 47:2 (June 2004), p. 211.

article does not mean that the Word is one god out of many other gods.<sup>24</sup> In a construction such as this the noun often lacks the article without losing definiteness. Inclusion of the article in this instance would contradict John's argument. It would read, "the Word was *the* God," meaning that all that we know as God is the Word; in other words, no other being could be God except the Word. Yet John did not misspeak when he said that the Word was with God, meaning that there is to God another being in addition to the Word. There is also God the Father (and God the Holy Spirit).

In short, it is hard to do sound theology and effective Christian apologetics without the original languages. Exegesis ought to be foundational in our theological and doctrinal stance. In addition to the above, culture also makes biblical languages essential.

#### 4. Culture

Understanding how language and culture operate tells us how the original languages contribute to our interpretation of the Bible. Language and culture cannot be separated; in fact, it is through language that we understand any culture since language reflects culture. Every people group builds 'their world' based on their language habits. Aldous Huxley notes that in societies where there is no language behavior is nonhuman.<sup>25</sup> Language is important for both communication and identification. A certain word may be used differently in various cultures to connote a range of ideas. We sometimes translate two or more different words in the original languages with the same word in English due to language limitation. Yet we know that an author's choice of one word over another is never capricious.

The words *gā'āl* (גָּאֵל) and *pādāh* (פָּדָה) are both often translated as 'redeem' or 'deliver,' making it hard to notice any difference in their usage. The term *gā'āl* literally means 'to redeem, to perform the duty of a close relative' (Lev 25:47-54; Ruth 2:20). It is a legal term used in the context of family law whereby a close male relative intervenes on behalf of another to maintain the family unit. *Pādāh* on the other hand means 'to ransom, buy, pay, redeem' and is commonly used in cultic contexts to describe how human beings and animals may be ransomed. In Exod. 13:1-2, 13, the LORD allows the firstborn of human beings and animals to be ransomed by the payment of a price. This is an instance where a word conveys a cultural practice that the English translation fails to show. It is therefore clear that by relying solely on translations one can easily miss the point that the author is seeking to highlight by his choice of certain words. Proper interpretation partly depends on how

<sup>24</sup> When the definite article occurs with the subject and the predicate, both nouns are definite and interchangeable. But when the definite article is absent from the predicate, as here, the nouns are not interchangeable.

<sup>25</sup> Aldous Huxley, "Words and their Meaning" in *The Importance of Language* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1962), p. 4.

much we understand the culture of that text - a culture that is shared by both the author and the original readers. Thus to grasp the message of the biblical authors we need to investigate the meanings which the biblical authors attributed to the words in their respective languages and cultures.

## 5. Rhetorical Features

In the preceding argument we have already seen that meaning, translations, theology and culture make biblical languages indispensable. We can add rhetorical features to this list. Biblical languages help us to read and appreciate the Bible as literature. Writers employ various rhetorical features in the process of communication. Parallelism, wordplay, chiasm, rhyme, and repetition among others are literary devices that authors use to capture attention, highlight key points, enliven discourse and add aesthetic value and creativity to their composition. Understanding these devices is important in interpretation since every language has its own unique literary styles. We do not need to belabor the fact that there are aspects of Hebrew and Greek grammar and syntax that contain treasures of truth which cannot be brought over into the various translations in our possession.<sup>26</sup>

A play on words is very common in Hebrew and is often missed in translations. In Prov 12:16, the words “fool” *kā’sō* (כֹּסֵף) and “prudent man” *w<sup>o</sup>koseh* (כֹּסֵף) follow each other in order to emphasize the contrast between a fool and a prudent man. In Hebrew the similar sounds produced when each of these words is pronounced effectively captures attention. No translation can reproduce such artistry. Another example is Ruth 1:1 where Elimelech and his household leave Bethlehem (*bēth lehem*) because of famine. The irony is that *bēth lehem* is literally ‘house of bread’ which is now without bread. The use of acrostics is also worth mentioning. Acrostics occur when the first letter of successive phrases or sections begin with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet and serve as a mnemonic device to aid memory. The beauty of texts such as Psalms 25, 34, 111, 112, 119 and 145 can hardly be captured in a translation.<sup>27</sup> These are among the rhetorical features that can only be discerned from the Hebrew text.

## Biblical Languages and Preaching

Preaching makes studying biblical languages essential. Chisholm asserts that in order to preach credibly and competently from the Old Testament one needs a working knowledge of Hebrew and basic exegetical skills.<sup>28</sup> The same thing can be said about Greek. Chisholm’s lament from a number of years ago is very pertinent today:

<sup>26</sup> W. N. Donovan (“The Homiletical Worth of the Study of Hebrew” in *The Biblical World*, 32:1, [Jul., 1908], p. 56) says that English words sometimes fail to summon a picture as the original word may do.

<sup>27</sup> Also Proverbs 31.

<sup>28</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, “Credibility, Competence, and Confidence”, p. 10.

It's easy to "go with the flow," assume that Hebrew is a luxury, not an essential, and rely on the opinions of others when preaching and teaching the Old Testament.... God's people look to us [preachers and teachers of the Bible] for insight and direction, often assuming that our education and experience give us the credibility and competence needed for the task. But if we do not really possess that credibility and competence, are we not living a lie? Without credibility and competence, do we have the right to stand before God's people and proclaim his word in an authoritative tone?<sup>29</sup>

Confidence that flows from thorough preparation contributes to authoritative proclamation of God's Word. Preparing sermons from the original language enhances such confidence in ways that English translations cannot. For a beginner, this will be harder and consume more time, but nothing of true merit is ever produced without unrelenting hard work. The goal is to accurately divide the Word of God and proclaim it fearlessly. Perhaps Richardson's caution is apt here: "If a man is not willing to be, and to be regarded as, a specialist on the Bible, and to have men seek of him reliable opinions, he should resign from the ministry."<sup>30</sup>

A good preacher will not always want to rely on the opinions of others in the interpretation of the Bible. I once attended Sunday worship service at a church where the sermon was from 1 John. When the pastor came to 1 John 4:8 he said, "God is love, and as a certain scholar has commented, we cannot say that love is God." This is a case in which a preacher openly displays incompetence! It is true that we cannot say, "Love is God." The question is, why? I was sure that if faced with this question, this preacher would have nothing to say based on his understanding of the Greek text.<sup>31</sup> He depended on what a certain scholar said without being able to check it out for himself.

Another common mistake we hear from many preachers, teachers and a few authors<sup>32</sup> is that *agapē* (ἀγάπη) is divine and sacrificial love while *philia* (φιλία) is brotherly love.<sup>33</sup> This is a faulty assertion that cannot withstand even

<sup>29</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, "Credibility, Competence, and Confidence", p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> H. G. Richardson, "The Use of Hebrew to a Minister", p. 80.

<sup>31</sup> In Greek, this has to do with determining the subject in a sentence with an equative verb (also known as a copula or linking verb). In this case a sentence contains two words linked by a 'to be' verb, which may be stated (as in 1 John 4:8) or implied, and both the subject and the predicate are in the same case, i.e. nominative case. How do we identify the subject and the predicate nominative? There are three basic rules. First, if one of the two words is a pronoun then the pronoun becomes the subject. Second, if one of the two words is articular then the articular word becomes the subject. Third, if one of the words is a proper name then the proper name is the subject. These rules can be further explained, but we don't have space for that here. According to these rules, especially number two, God has to be the subject of *ho theos agapē estin* (ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν), 1 John 4:8b.

<sup>32</sup> See Joseph Webb, R. Kysar, *Greek for Preachers* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> In English both words are translated with one word- 'love.'

a cursory reading of the Greek New Testament.<sup>34</sup> Without going into the details here, the point is that *agapē* and *philia* are used both when referring to divine love and to brotherly love. In order to preach credibly and competently a preacher must not be content with the opinions of others (some of which might be inaccurate); rather, he must engage the Word of God firsthand in the original languages then interact with his fellow commentators.

One repeated temptation that preachers need to overcome goes like this: "I have studied the Bible and preached from it many times so I know it pretty well. I can preach a good sermon even with minimal preparation, such as preparing on a Sunday morning." In order to overcome this temptation, among other things, a preacher needs to embrace a close reading of the text as well as employing the "defamiliarization principle". A close reading is an intentional engagement with the text that carefully follows and analyzes the linguistic techniques, literary context and the thought-flow of the writer. The "defamiliarization principle", on the other hand, is an attempt to make the familiar unfamiliar. This leads to a discovery of insights we have never seen in the text before, insights we cannot glean from an English text.<sup>35</sup> We are reading and re-reading the text for digestion and deep comprehension, not just to fulfill a pastoral obligation.

There is no better way of cultivating 'close reading' and 'defamiliarization' than to read from the Hebrew and Greek texts. This forces us to slow down in order to adequately digest the Word of God. Andrew J. Schmutzer notes,

One of the greatest advantages in referring to biblical Hebrew [and Greek] in study is that it slows us down. Our problem is not that we preach too little. Rather, we preach too much without adequate passion or preparation. Analyzing the passage in the original language enables the preacher to be saturated with the text and dialogue with its message.<sup>36</sup>

When we are slowed down we are forced to obtain a clearer understanding of the text. Once we have a better understanding, we will be able to better explain it to others.<sup>37</sup> The dividends accrued from such efforts are unequaled.

---

<sup>34</sup> See Lk 11:43; Jn 3:19; 5:20; 16:27, etc.

<sup>35</sup> Gerald W Peterman, "The Use and Abuse of Greek in Preaching" in *The Moody Handbook of Preaching*, Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008, p. 220, states, "Studying the Greek text can yield insights on various levels. These insights can be missed when reading the English text, even if this text is found alongside an interlinear Greek text. As preachers of the Word, it can be profitable for our hearers to hear what we have gained from study of the original language."

<sup>36</sup> Andrew J. Schmutzer, "Using Biblical Hebrew in Sermon Preparation" in *The Moody Handbook of Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), p. 203.

<sup>37</sup> See Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1946), p. 120.

At this point a word of caution is pertinent. A preacher does not need to use Hebrew or Greek words in his sermon in order to demonstrate that he has prepared adequately. I have listened to preachers who abuse original languages as they confuse their hearers and make them feel as though they are unlearned. Preaching time is not meant for displaying or parading linguistic arrogance in the name of good exegesis. We study the original languages in order to gain a better understanding of the text, which in turn ought to better equip us to explain it to our hearers in a language they can understand. I fully agree with Kenneth Wuest that,

There is no place in the Christian pulpit for a display or affectation of learning. Nor should there be any undue emphasis placed upon *minutiae* in the presentation of one's knowledge when preaching the Word. The trained exegete will leave the technicalities connected with the grammar and syntax of the Greek language, back where they belong, in his study. He will bring only the finished product with him into the pulpit.<sup>38</sup>

So as much as we are encouraging preachers to saturate themselves with the Hebrew and Greek texts, we are also encouraging them to humbly offer the end product without condescension and without drawing attention to their linguistic prowess.

### Conclusion

Are the original languages worthwhile? What difference does studying Hebrew and Greek make? Throughout this article we have argued that studying biblical languages is indispensable if we desire accurate exegesis, sound theology, and informed exposition. Andrew Schmutzer says that "...hard training in biblical languages has fallen on hard times."<sup>39</sup> But why is this so? Is it because of a movement toward professional training instead of academic achievement?<sup>40</sup> Does this reflect "a trade-school mentality, and a closet anti-intellectualism"?<sup>41</sup> Where are the 'John Calvins' of our day who are convinced that "we cannot understand the teaching of God unless we know his styles and languages"?<sup>42</sup> The excuses that some people give for failing to acquire competence in the original languages include the ready availability of good translations and arguing that these languages are for the college and seminary professors rather than church ministers. Others argue that most of the pastors who have had theological training never use Hebrew and Greek in sermon preparation, hence learning these languages is irrelevant. We have also observed that there are some people who are convinced that these languages are only for exceptionally gifted individuals.

---

<sup>38</sup> Wuest, *The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament*, p. 136.

<sup>39</sup> Schmutzer, "Using Biblical Hebrew in Sermon Preparation", p. 194.

<sup>40</sup> E. E. Ellis, "Language Skills and Christian Ministry" in *Reformed Review*, 24:3 (1971), pp. 162-163.

<sup>41</sup> Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, p. 80.

<sup>42</sup> Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, p. 13.

Our discussion from beginning to end has demonstrated that these excuses cannot hold water when subjected to close scrutiny. The reasons why we cannot regard biblical languages as optional extras are wide-ranging and weighty.<sup>43</sup> They include the fact that meaning is both conventional and historically particular; that every translation is an interpretation; that exegesis is foundational in doing theology and Christian apologetics; that culture and language are inextricably intertwined; that every language has unique rhetorical features that cannot be adequately captured in a translation; and that every preacher needs to study the Word of God firsthand as he practices close reading as well as the defamiliarization principle. If we regard the Word of God highly and are passionate about handling it properly, then we will do whatever it takes to understand and proclaim the divine revelation. Charles H. Spurgeon declared that, “a man to comment well should be able to read the Bible in the original.”<sup>44</sup>

### Bibliography

- Beekman, John and John Callow. *Translating the Word of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974.
- Block, Daniel I. “How Many Is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4-5”, *JETS*, 47:2, June 2004.
- Brisson, E. C. “Let Down Your Nets! A Case for Biblical Languages” in *As I See It Today*, 1995.
- Brown, Colin ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986.
- Brown, F. et al. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006.
- Chisholm, Robert B. Jr. “Credibility, Competence, and Confidence: The Necessity of Using Your Hebrew” in *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.
- Currid, John D. *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*. Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2006.
- Donovan, W. N. “The Homiletical Worth of the Study of Hebrew” in *The Biblical World*, 32:1, Jul., 1908.
- Doriani, D. “A Pastor’s Advice on Maintaining Original Language Skills” in *Presbyterion*, 9:2, 1993.
- Ellis, E.E. “Language Skills and Christian Ministry” in *Reformed Review*, 24:3, 1971.

---

<sup>43</sup> For additional literature on this subject see, D. Doriani, “A Pastor’s Advice on Maintaining Original Language Skills” in *Presbyterion*, 19:2 (1993), pp. 103-15; and E.C. Brisson, “Let Down Your Nets! A Case for Biblical Languages” in *As I See It Today* (1995), pp. 1-4; and S. Hafemann, “Seminary, Subjectivity, and the Centrality of Scripture: Reflections on the Current Crisis in Evangelical Seminary Education” in *JETS*, Vol. 31 (1988), pp. 129-143.

<sup>44</sup> As found in Thomas Lyon, “A Plea for the Study of the Scriptures in the Original Languages” in *Banner of Truth*, Vol. 474 (2003), p. 4.

Hafemann, S. "Seminary, Subjectivity, and the Centrality of Scripture: Reflections on the Current Crisis in Evangelical Seminary Education" in *JETS*, Vol. 31, 1988.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Why Use Biblical Languages in Preaching?" in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. Vol. 3, 1999.

Huxley, Aldous. "Words and their Meaning" in *The Importance of Language*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1962.

Lyon, Thomas "A Plea for the Study of the Scriptures in the Original Languages" in *Banner of Truth*, Vol. 474, 2003.

Moo, D.J. "1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance" in *Trinity Journal*, 1:1, 1980.

Mounce, William D. *Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles*, Vol. 46. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000.

Payne, Philip B. "Libertarian Women in Ephesus: Response to D.J. Moo's article, '1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance'" in *Trinity Journal*, 2:2, 1981.

Peterman, Gerald W. "The Use and Abuse of Greek in Preaching" in *The Moody Handbook of Preaching*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008.

Richardson, H. G. "The Use of Hebrew to a Minister" in *The Harvard Theological Review*. 2:1, Jan., 1909.

Robertson, A. T. *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*. New York: Doran, 1923.

Silva, Moises. *God, Language and Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

Schmutzer, Andrew J. "Using Biblical Hebrew in Sermon Preparation" in *The Moody Handbook of Preaching*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008.

Spicq, Ceslas. *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Vol. 2. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994.

Waltke, Bruce. K. "How I Changed My Mind About Teaching Hebrew (or Retained It)" in *Crux*, 29:4, 1993.

Webb, Joseph and Robert Kysar. *Greek for Preachers*. St. Louis: Chalice, 2002.

Wuest, S. Kenneth. *Untranslatable Riches from the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1945.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1946.