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The meaning of "Epignosis"

by Robert E. Picirelli

Dr. Picirelli is Registrar and Professor of New Testament in the Free Will Baptist Bible College, Nashville, Tennessee. His doctoral dissertation dealt with some exegetical problems in II Peter, including the meaning of the Greek word epignosis ("knowledge") in that epistle. He has devoted further study to this last point, on which (with regard to its use elsewhere in the New Testament) there was disagreement between two such masters of exegesis as J. B. Lightfoot and J. A. Robinson. This paper is a revision of one which was read some time ago to the appropriate section of the Evangelical Theological Society (U.S.A.).

THE meaning of the Greek word *epignosis* is particularly important for the interpretation of Peter's second epistle. Although much attention has been given the word by such competent interpreters as Lightfoot and Robinson, the last word may not yet have been said.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT USAGE

Epignosis occurs some twenty times in the New Testament—far less than its cognate verb—and is used only in Second Peter, Hebrews, and Paul's later epistles. All these must be considered if we are to form a complete picture about the noun's exact meaning. Nor need we expect all uses to carry exactly the same connotation: the more common and simpler words of a language are apt to be used by all with exactly the same semantic implications, but not so the rarer ones.

Taking Paul's letters in chronological order, the noun occurs three times in Romans, eight times in the Prison Epistles, and four times in the Pastorals. Indeed, these three groupings reveal interesting variations in Paul's own use of the word.

In Romans 1: 28, the heathen have rejected to hold God in their "knowledge;" in 3: 20, "knowledge" of sin is by the law; and in 10: 2, the Jews' zeal is not according to "knowledge." In two of these, *epignosis* is absolute, and in the other has "sin" for its object. In none of the three does the compound seem, at first sight, very different in meaning from simple *gnosis*.

The picture in the Prison Epistles is quite different. In Colossians 1: 9, Paul prays that his readers be filled with the "knowledge" of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; in 1: 10, the prayer continues with the request that they increase in the "knowledge" of God: in 2: 2, he "agonizes" for his readers to come to full

understanding of the "knowledge" of the mystery of God; and in 3: 10, the readers are said to have put on the new man who is renewed in "knowledge." In Ephesians 1: 17, Paul prays that his readers be granted a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the "knowledge" of God; and in 4: 23 he desires to build up the church to a unity of the faith and the "knowledge" of the Son of God. In Philemon 6, Paul desires that Philemon have "knowledge" of every good thing in Christ. In Philippians 1: 9, his prayer is for love to abound in all "knowledge" and perception. We note that *epignosis*, in these places, is almost invariably associated with such words as wisdom, understanding, and perception; and with a prayer that the reader abound, be filled, increase, be built up, or be effectual in this particular quality. In these passages, the object of *epignosis* is God, God's will, the mystery of God, the Son of God, or "every good thing in Christ."

The scene changes again when we examine the Pastorals. In 1 Timothy 2: 4, God desires all men to be saved and come to the "knowledge" of the truth. In 2 Timothy 2: 25, God may grant repentance unto the "knowledge" of the truth; and in 3: 7, the false teachers ever learn but never come to the "knowledge" of the truth. In Titus 1: 1, Paul is a servant according to the faith of God's elect and the "knowledge" of the truth. We cannot miss the fact that *epignosis*, in all four of these occurrences, has "truth" for its object and that all four passages associate the word closely with the conversion event itself. For the sake of convenience, we may put the one occurrence in Hebrews (10: 26) in this same group, since there too we have the "knowledge" of the truth intimately associated with conversion.

And now to Second Peter, where *epignosis* is certainly one of the key words. It occurs first in 1: 2, where Peter prays that grace and peace be multiplied to his readers in the "knowledge" of God; then in 1: 3, where Christ has freely granted all the things necessary for spiritual life and piety through the "knowledge" of Him who called us; next in 1: 8, where we are taught how to avoid being barren or unfruitful in respect to the "knowledge" of Christ; and finally in 2: 20, where reference is made to those who escaped the defilements of the world by means of the "knowledge" of Christ. All four of these have God or Christ for the object of this knowledge, and all seem—at least at first sight—to be looking back to the conversion experience.

II. THE DEBATE OF THE INTERPRETERS

The main question that must be decided, if one is to be sure about the exact meaning of *epignosis* in all these passages, is whether there is any difference between the compound word and the simple

gnosis. If so, what is that difference, and what is the exact force of the compound?

A. Conflicting opinions

There are very few commentators, if any, who think that *epignosis* is never different from *gnosis*. Bultmann appears to take such a position, although the following words of his will be qualified later:

It is, however, impossible to say that there is any difference between *gnosis* and *epignosis*, either in N.T. or LXX . . . The compound noun at Rom. i. 28 corresponds to the simple verb at ver. 21. There is no difference of meaning between the compound noun at Phil. i. 9 and the simple at 1 Cor. i. 5; Rom. xv. 14.¹

Some feel certain there is a difference, but want to guard against over-statement of that difference. Alford, for example, believes that *epignosis* means "mature knowledge," but adds that it "can hardly be given in English without too strong a phrase."² Plummer, along the same line, suggests that *epignosis* implies a "fuller, riper, more minute knowledge," but, he says, "any of these expressions would be a little too strong, as the simple word is a little too weak."³

Others are not so hesitant, and give great emphasis to the difference. Lenski, for example: "There may be a false *gnosis*, but never a false *epignosis*. The latter is a true, clear, full knowledge that is personally embraced."⁴ Strachan is on this same side:

Epignosis contrasted with *gnosis* marks "a higher degree of intensity, an energy of deeper penetration. It is not a quiescent state, the resting in an acquirement, but the advance of one to whom easy attainment is but the impulse of fresh effort; one who is not content to know, but ever, in Hosea's words (vi. 3), follows on to know" (Paget, *Spirit of Discipline*, p. 112).⁵

B. Lightfoot's view

When differences are asserted to exist between *epignosis* and *gnosis*, opinions vary considerably as to the nature of those differences. Probably the most widely influential position is that of J. B. Lightfoot, who deals with *epignosis* in his discussion of Coloss-

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, "Gnosis" (Volume II, book II of *Bible Key Words*, from Gerhard Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament*, trans. from German first edition and edited by J. R. Coates (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1958), p. 38.

² Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, fourth edition (London, Oxford, & Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1871), IV, 390.

³ Alfred Plummer, "The Second Epistle of St. Peter," *A Bible Commentary for English Readers*, Charles Ellicott, editor (London: Cassell & Company, Ltd., n.d.), VIII, 444.

⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1945), p. 253.

⁵ R. H. Strachan, "The Second Epistle General of Peter," *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, editor (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951), V, 127.

ians 1: 9. Citing Chrysostom, Justin Martyr, and 1 Corinthians 13: 12, he concludes:

The compound *epignosis* is an advance upon *gnosis*, denoting a larger, more thorough knowledge . . . Hence also *epignosis* is used especially of the knowledge of God and of Christ, as being the perfection of knowledge.⁶

In referring to Philippians 1: 9, Lightfoot gives yet another reason for his view. There Paul prays "that love . . . may abound in knowledge (*epignosis*) and all perception." Lightfoot is convinced that the preposition *epi* added to *gnosis* in this verse answers to the adjective "all" in front of "perception."⁷ Many commentators follow Lightfoot, and usually refer to him without appearing to have given extensive consideration to the matter themselves. Sanday and Headlam, for example, simply say (in reference to Romans 10: 2): "See Lightfoot on Col. i. 9, to whose note there is nothing to add."⁸

C. The position of Robinson

Some interpreters maintain independence of Bishop Lightfoot. Bigg, for example, insists that the difference is more in what is known than how well it is known. Commenting on 2 Peter 1: 2, he says:

If we compare vers. 5, 6, 8, there appears to be a difference intended between *gnosis* and *epignosis*. The former, as in 1 Pet. iii. 7, appears to denote good sense, understanding, practical wisdom; the latter is used of the knowledge of Christ . . . But generally speaking, in the New Testament it is not easy to keep *gnosis* and *epignosis* distinct.⁹

The most important opposition to Lightfoot is furnished, however, by J. Armitage Robinson, who has devoted a thorough and detailed section to *epignosis* in his commentary on Ephesians. He may be consulted for a careful account of the use of the word in classical Greek, the Septuagint, Polybius, and the New Testament. His answers to Lightfoot's citations from Chrysostom and Justin Martyr are convincing, and his conclusions cannot be treated lightly:

. . . the simple verb would have given the meaning, intelligently if less precisely, in all the cases which we have cited. There is no indication that *epiginoskein* conveys the idea of a fuller, more perfect, more advanced knowledge.

We find a large number of compounds in *epi*, in which the preposition does not in the least signify *addition*, but rather perhaps *direction*. It seems to fix the verb upon a definite object . . . In these cases we cannot say that the

6 J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan & Company, Limited, 1927), p. 136.

7 J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, fourth edition revised (London: Macmillan & Company, Limited, 1908), p. 86.

8 William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, fifth edition (in *The International Critical Commentary* series; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), p. 283.

9 Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (in *The International Critical Commentary* series, second edition; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), pp. 253.

compound verb is stronger than the simple verb. The preposition is not *intensive*, but *directive* (if the word may be allowed). It prepares us to expect the limitation of the verb to a particular object.

Thus *ginoskein* means "to know" in the fullest sense that can be given to the word "knowledge": *epiginoskein* directs attention to some particular point in regard to which "knowledge" is affirmed. So that to perceive a particular thing, or to perceive who a particular person is, may fitly be expressed by *epiginoskein*. There is no such limitation about the word *ginoskein*, though of course it may be so limited by its context....

So far then as we are able to distinguish between *gnosis* and *epignosis*, we may say that *gnosis* is the wider word and expresses "knowledge" in the fullest sense: *epignosis* is knowledge directed towards a particular object, perceiving, discerning, recognizing: but it is not knowledge in the abstract: that is *gnosis*. It follows that the genitive after *gnosis* may be either subjective or objective: but the genitive after *epignosis* denotes the object of the knowledge.¹⁰

Moulton and Milligan appear to be in support of Robinson's view, and observe that his conclusions are "on the whole borne out by the evidence of the papyri."¹¹

III. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can now be drawn, and with reasonable confidence, at least as far as this writer is concerned.

1. Robinson's position is, in a general way, stronger than Lightfoot's. The bases for his conclusions are more firm, and the papyri citations of Moulton and Milligan lend support. His understanding of the force of the *epi* in this compound is both logical and in accord with other *epi* compounds. The meaning he gives *epignosis* will fit the word wherever it occurs: the *epi* is almost like a built-in arrow, an emphatic pointer in the direction of the object known. But Robinson's view, while true as far as it goes, does not go far enough. *Epignosis* is much more specific, at least in many of its occurrences.

2. No one explanation of the exact connotation of *epignosis* will cover all its uses in the New Testament. The survey, above, of Paul's varied uses of the word ought to convince anyone that the semantic force of the word will differ according to context. Have we not learned about semantics, in our day, so that such variations will not surprise us?

Robinson's interpretation of *epignosis* will apply to each occurrence of the word, but it will not completely explain them all. Even a cursory glance at a good lexicon will reveal that *epignosis*—like other words—is used with a variety of meanings. Liddell and Scott, for example, list "recognition," "determination," "knowledge," "scientific theory," and "decision."

¹⁰ J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Macmillan & Company, Limited, 1903), pp. 249-254.

¹¹ J. H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1949), p. 236.

For further confirmation of this variety, and for additional help in understanding *epignosis*, we ought to study the New Testament usage of the cognate verb *epiginosko*. It appears forty-two times, although curiously not by any means with the same distribution as the noun. Matthew uses it six times; Mark four; Luke and Acts eighteen times. Paul uses it twelve times, with nine of these in 1 and 2 Corinthians and one each in Romans, Colossians, and 1 Timothy. Peter uses the word twice, both in 2 Peter 2: 21.

These uses can be classified as follows: (1) to know someone or something for who or what he or it really is (Mt. 7: 16, 20; 11: 27; 14: 35; 17: 12; Mk. 6: 33, 54; Acts 12: 14; 27: 39; 28: 1; Cor. 13: 12). (2) to come to a realization or perception (inwardly) of something (Mk. 2: 8; 5: 30; Lk. 1: 4, 22; 5: 22; Acts 3: 11; 19: 34). (3) to learn or find out some (outward) fact (Lk. 7: 37; 23: 7; 24: 16, 31; Acts 9: 30; 22: 24, 29; 24: 8). (4) a realization or understanding that is already in existence, much like simple *gnosis* (Acts 25: 10; Rom. 1: 32; 2 Cor. 13: 5). (5) to give acknowledgment to someone or something (Acts 4: 13; 1 Cor. 14: 37; 16: 18; 2 Cor. 1: 13, 14; 6: 9). (6) the equivalent of conversion (Col. 1: 6; 1 Tim. 4: 3). This classification may be somewhat over-simplified, and some of these verses may need further study; but the list will at least serve to demonstrate the variety possible in the meanings of the word.

3. There is some ground for giving *epignosis* an intensive force in some of its New Testament uses, though probably not so emphatic as given by Lightfoot and his followers. Indeed, Robinson himself may have made one point that would allow this; he quotes from the passage cited from Justin Martyr by Lightfoot, and answers him thus:

“Is there an *episteme* which affords a knowledge (*gnosis*) of the actual things human and divine, and after that a knowledge (*epignosis*) of the divineness and righteousness of these same things?” Here the distinction (if we are to press for one) is between a knowledge which reveals to us the things themselves, and a knowledge which discerns certain qualities of those things.¹³

One will quickly see that a “knowledge which discerns certain qualities” of things already known is, in fact, an advance in knowledge, a more perfect knowledge. Even so, it seems clear that such a meaning for *epignosis* comes more from the *context* in which it is used than from the force of the *epi*. And Paul’s uses of the word in the Prison Epistles are the only ones where we can be sure it means mature knowledge, with an intensive or perfective force. Perhaps it is significant that Lightfoot’s commentaries, in which he

¹² H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised by H. S. Jones (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, n.d.), 1, 627.

¹³ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

treated the meaning of *epignosis*, are written on the Prison Epistles rather than on the Pastorals or Peter.

4. There appears to be one very important factor involved in the meaning of *epignosis* which neither Lightfoot nor Robinson has caught. This writer is convinced that the *epi* in *epignosis* has, often, an inceptive force, referring to the specific experience when one came to the knowledge of some person or thing. If Lightfoot calls his understanding of *epi intensive*, and Robinson calls his *directive*, we might call this *ingressive* or—still better—*decisive*.

In other words *epignosis* would look to the particular crisis experience when knowledge comes upon someone, when knowledge enters. In this vein we could say that the simple *gnosis* would most aptly represent a knowledge already existing, a state of being (a “linear” word, if you please). Then *epignosis* would represent a point (a “punctiliar” word) at which one has the experience of coming to know.

Several lines of argument can be used to support this conclusion. For one thing, *epignosis* is often used in direct connection with a temporal adverb, like “when” or “after.” For another, we can compare the uses of the cognate verb *epiginosko*, as classified above. In particular, note uses (2), (3), (5), and (6) in that list.

Consider also that this is a logical understanding of *epi*, as well as for its English equivalent “upon.” “To come” is rather general and unrestricted; “to come upon” marks a very specific point of arrival. “To dawn” would be accurate enough; “to dawn upon” is even more pointedly decisive. In the same way, there is something quite specific and decisive about “knowledge-upon.”

Most important, consider that *epi* has this kind of effect in various compounds other than *epignosis*. *ago* means to bring or lead; *epago* means to “bring a thing on one.” *eimi* is, simply, to be; *epeimi* is “to come upon, or arrive”. Likewise, *eperchomai* is “to come to, to arrive.” While *erotao* means to ask or inquire, *eperotao* means “to accost one with an inquiry, put a question to.” If *bareo* means to be heavy, *epibareo* means “to put a burden upon, to load.” And *epibaino* is “to get upon, mount,” or “to go aboard (a ship)” or “set foot in, enter.” *Epiballo* is “to throw one’s self upon, rush upon,” and *epiblepo* means “to turn the eyes upon.” These examples could be multiplied at great length.¹⁴ (It is, perhaps, significant that most of the occurrences of such *epi*-verbs as these are in the aorist tense in actual usage.)

¹⁴ All meanings quoted in this paragraph are from Joseph Henry Thayer *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, fourth edition (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901).

In other words, the placing of *epi* on the front of a word very often (perhaps more than with any other one result) makes a specific application of the word to a specific situation or circumstance. In part, this is what Robinson was shooting for when he saw the "directive" force of the preposition. And he was on the right track. But he failed to see that the fact of application may just as well be the thing emphasized as the object to which the application is made. A better word than "directive" would have been "applicative."

Thus *epignosis* often involves the particular crisis experience when knowledge is applied to the individual, the time when there is ingress or entrance into the state of knowledge. Robinson does say that "As a rule *gnosis* is used where knowledge in the abstract is spoken of, but *epignosis* where the special object of the knowledge is to be expressed."¹⁵ Hodge says *epignosis* is . . . especially experimental knowledge;"¹⁶ if he means the experience of coming to know, he is right—at least for many occurrences of the word. Liddell and Scott give "to learn to know" as one of the meanings of *epiginosko*.¹⁷

This is not to say that *epignosis* is always "decisive," else the same mistake will be made as by the others who attempt to give the word a single, uniform connotation at every place. Paul's uses of the word in the Prison Epistles will definitely not be so explained, nor probably will the occurrences in Romans.

5. Based on the foregoing, a reasonable conclusion can now be drawn that the Petrine usage of *epignosis*, in which this writer is particularly interested, is in a sense which is exactly equal to conversion—as is Paul's use of the word in the Pastorals, and the one occurrence in Hebrews. This conclusion is in accord both with the "directive-applicative" sense of *epignosis* seen by Robinson, and with the "ingressive-decisive" sense explained above.

Such a conclusion is also supported by the fact that many commentators on Second Peter have come to similar results based on their analysis of the context. Bultmann observes:

Curiously enough, the compound *epignosis*, like the compound verb, is almost a technical term for the decisive knowledge of God which is involved in conversion to the Christian faith . . . This is not the case at Rom. i. 28, but clear examples of it appear in the Pastoral Epistles . . . at Heb. x. 26 . . . II Pet. i. 3, 8; ii. 20.¹⁸

¹⁵ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

¹⁶ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), p. 73.

¹⁷ Liddell and Scott, *op. cit.*, I, 627.

¹⁸ Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

Bengel observes that, in Peter, *epignosis* is "united with the cleansing from sins."¹⁹ Weiss comments that it is "the knowledge of God, which they have gained by having learned to see in Jesus their exalted Lord,"²⁰ and, again: ". . . at their conversion, which implied a knowledge of Christ as their Lord and Saviour."²¹ Wand refers to the fact that ". . . in II Peter knowledge is the foundation of personal Christianity,"²² and adds: "Notice the prominence given to knowledge as an instrument in conversion."²³ Plummer, on II Peter 1: 3, maintains that *epignosis* means ". . . learning to know God as one who has called us to salvation."²⁴ Strachan has it just about right, then, when he observes: "*Epignosis* in this epistle corresponds to *pistis* in the Pauline sense (Spitta, p. 522)."²⁵

The interpreter of Second Peter must take this conclusion into account. In 1: 2, this conversion-experience of coming to the knowledge of God and the Lord Jesus is made the foundation for Peter's salutation-blessing. In 1: 3, "saving knowledge" (as suggested by Strachan²⁶) is seen as the medium through which Jesus, the Divine Power, has freely granted to us all the things needed for spiritual life and piety. In 1: 8, the *eis* will have to be taken to mean "in reference to": adding the Christian graces of verses 5-7 will keep us from being idle or fruitless in respect to the saving knowledge of Christ we experienced. Finally, in 2: 20, the persons so described will have to be regarded as having been brought to this genuine, saving knowledge of Christ and as having really escaped the defilements of the world thereby. All in all, Peter is particularly concerned in this epistle that those who have experienced this enlightening *epignosis* go on in Christian growth so as to be able to withstand false teachers and avoid apostasy.

*Free Will Baptist Bible College,
Nashville, Tennessee*

¹⁹ J. A. Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, revised and edited by Andrew R. Fausset (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXVII), V, 89.

²⁰ Bernhard Weiss, *A Commentary on the New Testament*, trans. G. H. Schodde and E. Wilson (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1906), IV, 229.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

²² J. W. C. Wand, *The General Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (in the *Westminster Commentaries*, ed. Walter Lock and D. C. Simpson. London: Methuen & Co., 1934), p. 147.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

²⁴ Plummer, *loc. cit.*

²⁵ Strachan, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

²⁶ *Idem.*