WHY HEBREW AND GREEK?

by C. C. Morris

And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek? (Acts 21.37)

With minor exceptions, the Old Testament of the Bible was written in ancient Hebrew and the New Testament was written in Greek. All new translations of the Bible are supposedly efforts to put the original Hebrew and Greek languages of the Bible into words all humanity can understand. All that would be unnecessary if it were not for two problems readers face:

 (1) what God in His wisdom did to the rebellious sinners at Babel--He thoroughly confounded their languages; and

 (2) English, like many languages, is a "living" language, and like anything living, it keeps growing and changing.

Whenever any nation's culture must be explained to foreigners, translating and defining words from one language to the other is usually necessary.

Because of the confusion of "tongues" or languages at Babel and the spread of the scriptures to foreign nations with foreign languages, the writers of Bible, or the Scriptures, and the speakers therein, had to translate words from one language to another, and they said so, as we shall shortly see. Since Babel, this has been a necessary fact of living in this world.

Complaints about the King James Version

The complaint we all too often hear, "The language in the King James Version (KJV) is out-of-date," is always lurking in the back-ground, never too far away. It may have been the King's English in its day, but that was in the year of our Lord 1611. Now we have a nation, if not a world of peasants who have little use for kings, multitudes who can scarcely understand the King's words of over four hundred years ago.

They want an easy-to-read Bible written in the serf's *language.*

For instance, take Mark 5.41: "And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise (Mark 5.41)." Why "Talitha cumi"? Because that is what the Lord Jesus said. He did not literally say, "Damsel, arise," which of course is English; He said, "Talitha cumi." That is good reporting. "Damsel, arise" is a good translation, so we may know what talitha cumi means, as Mark explains to us that is what the Lord actually said.

In the 21st century the youngsters may need additional help (thanks to the wonders of the modern educational system), since they have learned neither what a *damsel* is, nor do they understand the word *arise*. Nowadays, for many if not most high-schoolers to understand the modern version Bibles, they would no doubt need to say something more like "Get up, Girl!"

What is not so apparent is that the gospel writer Mark was translating for those Romans who read and spoke Koine Greek (which was the common man's every-day spoken Greek of that day, in contrast to *Classical* or formal Greek).

Truly the Bible in its original languages was written in common, everyday language. BUT the Greek words Mark wrote had to be translated

into English for us, so the nations speaking and reading English could understand what Christ said to the Jewish damsel in Aramaic (which most of the Hebrew/Jews would have understood, which is why the Lord spoke those, words in that particular language).

The same kind of labor, word-for-word translating, must also be done for every other language in the world into which the Bible is translated.

God Killed Some Languages

There is a distinct advantage of having the Bible in dead languages such as Koine Greek and biblical Hebrew rather than having it in a living, ever-changing Language such as English.

Over time, with a living language like our English, people change the meanings of words. That is why such languages are called "living."

These changes are not always for the better. What would today's teen-agers think after reading James 2.2-3—*"For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; (3) And ye have respect to* him that weareth the gay clothing, *and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place, and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool"*?

Would our young people think James meant this visitor was a homosexual? Would they think James was talking about showing favoritism to a transvestite? How would our twenty-first century children and grandchildren interpret the line from the hymn "How Tedious and Tasteless the Hours" the line that says, *"The fields strive in vain to look* gay"?

You can see how a changing, living language such as our own, by making good, decent words like *gay* into slang, changing the traditional and

correct use of words, while inventing non-words (like "bling" for flashy jewelry, for example) because they do not have enough of a vocabulary to express themselves in plain grade school English—you can see how all this causes problems for people who, not having a decent education, do not know the older, or original, correct meanings of words.

The sovereign God of the universe killed off the biblical Hebrew; modern Hebrew is not entirely the same as the Hebrew of the Old Testament Bible, which is considered a dead language. Today we can get dictionary definitions of all the Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible from Strong's Concordance, which has Hebrew and Greek dictionaries in the back pages. A reader does not have to know one word, not even one letter, of Greek or Hebrew. Dr. Strong assigned a number to every word used in the entire Bible in the original languages, and he put those numbers beside each word in the main concordance. To find its original meaning, all one needs to do is find that number in the Hebrew or Greek dictionary at the back of the concordance.

Moses and the prophets did not have words for refrigerators, cell phones, pizza, atomic bombs, or alarm clocks. Modern Hebrew does; Hebrew is once again a living, growing language. The Lord's wisdom of killing off the old Bible Hebrew is that when the words died, their meanings were fixed and forever unchangeable. We can find exactly how most, if not all Hebrew words were used and precisely what they meant thousands of years ago. Being unchanging, these words mean the exact same thing they meant to Moses and to Isaiah in their days, and in any subsequent day including our own.

Everything said about biblical Hebrew above can be said for the Koine Greek of the New Testament. It is dead, unchanging, with fixed, exact meanings for each word. There is little doubt (there should be *no* doubt), about exactly what Christ, Paul, or anyone else in the Bible meant when they

used one word and not another. God did not leave it up to the biblical writers to choose synonyms, swapping one word for another. Each word in the original is exactly inspired. Holy men of God spake moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1.21).

For all practical purposes, doubts about what a biblical word means are almost always caused by revisionists who intend to change the original meanings of the inspired words to support their own personal doctrinal views.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is those who would change "virgin" in Isaiah 7.14 to "young woman." Surely anyone with a modicum of understanding would know that a young woman's conceiving and bearing a son is not much of a sign. Tens of thousands of "young women" are doing that every day of the year, and they always have. But for a VIRGIN to conceive and bear a son is the most wonderful and powerful sign God Almighty ever gave to those who are blessed to see and understand the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

"The Greeks had a word for it." When Matthew 1.22-23 quotes from Isaiah 7.14, the Greek word used in verse 23 for "virgin" is PARTHENOS. Those who remember learning about the buildings in ancient Athens, Greece, will remember the Parthenon, prominent among them. And what was the Parthenon? A temple honoring Athena, "the *virgin* goddess," the patron goddess of Athens. And what does Parthenon actually mean? "The temple of the virgin," or "the temple of the virgins." There is no doubt about what Isaiah or Matthew said or meant. The Greeks had a word for it; Mary the mother of Jesus was a virgin, as Isaiah and Matthew said.

Problems With King James' English

We have the additional problem of KJV English, some words of which are still in modern use but have different meanings from what they meant four hundred years ago.

Some words used in King James' day have the opposite meaning today. Let ("letteth"), in 2 Thessalonians 2.7, meant *hinder, prevent*, or *restrain* in King James' lifetime, and now let means *not* to hinder, prevent, or restrain—at least in the minds of most people. "Let" now still means *to hinder* or *delay*, as the FIRST definition in Webster, although most people nowadays seem to think it means *not* to hinder! (as in, "Let me go! ")

Other words, because of what they imply, have taken on the implied meaning. Prevent in 1 Thess. 4.15 comes from a word that means to precede, to go before, or to go off and leave someone or something behind. One might ask, "What's the connection between prevent and precede?" The answer is plain enough in any grocery store. If someone cuts in front of you at the checkout stand to *precede* you on the way out, does this not *prevent* you by just that much from getting to the cashier? By her going before you, doesn't she go on her way and leave you behind?

In Romans 1.28, convenient, which we think means "handy," really means suitable or proper, as the word meet often does. When the Lord God said in Genesis 2.18, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him," the text means Eve was a fitting and proper companion for Adam.

Conversation means citizenship in Philippians 3.20, but it means behavior, character or deportment in Ephesians 4.22 and Hebrews 13.5; but in 2 Corinthians it means busy-ness. There are four different Greek words and meanings in these texts, but they are all translated into English by "conversation," and not a one means to talk with someone, to have a talk with him, as we now think of "having a conversation."

In the 1600s, *Conversation* meant more than people talking to each other, as we think of having a conversation; back then it meant one's complete behavior—not just what someone said, but it included what he did as his way of life; yet, for all that, this does not explain why in Philippians 3.20 "conversation" would be better translated as citizenship; but it would. The word comes from the Greek word politeuma, from which we get such words as polite, police, policy, and "politics."

The Police enforce the Policy of the State or government, which is *established* by the ruling class known as Politicians who, as subtly as possible, try hard to pass themselves off as the *establishment*. Their hardest job is letting the rest of us believe that "We the People" rule, and that the Politicians and Police are somehow our "public servants." The rest of us are expected to be very Polite to all Pol*ice* and to all Politicians, but neither the Police nor Politicians need to be Polite to us; in fact, they rarely are Polite at all, even to each other, except when they can perceive a distinct advantage to themselves in their doing so.

If you find these multiple uses of everyday words like prevent, precede, convenient, meet, conversation to be confusing, you are not alone. But fighting your way through word changes ina living language is worth it to understand what the Lord Jesus Christ and His prophets and apostles said and really meant. All of this, by the way, comes to us by the courtesy of our depraved ancestors at Babel, by way of Babylon, and by the Greek and Latin root words for our hit-and-miss English words. Enough said?

On the other hand, going back to Philippians 3.20: The children of God have a dual citizenship (politeuma): they are citizens of their native country in this world, of which they are "natural-born citizens"; and, by reason of their being born from above (John 3.3-5), they are also "*super*natural-born citizens" of Heaven.

Many Bible expositors, who are expected to expose a text's meaning to their hearers or readers, fail to take into account that no one can understand the Bible spiritually until they are born again by the Bible's Author, the Holy Spirit. "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2.14). " (*them* is crossed out in the text because it is a word supplied by the KJV translators that adds nothing to the sense of the text. Rather, it detracts from its meaning. It implies that although the natural man cannot know the things of the Spirit of God, he can know other things. But Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8.2, "And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.")

<u>When, Where, and Who?</u>

Ever since God confounded the world's language at the tower of Babel there has been a need for translations. The Bible abounds with examples because its peoples lived in a multicultural world. No matter what one's nationality may have been, he was often dealing with foreigners:

1. "And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue (Ezra 4.7)."

Don't let those names like Artaxerxes, Bishlam, and others throw you. They are not nearly as hard to read and say as many of the names that are in the news every day. Yet we adjust to these problems of pronunciation, don't we?

2. Nebuchadnezzar, king of the world and ruling over countless little countries, all with their own different languages and dialects, needed

translators. Among his Judean captives were four young men named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. You probably know the latter three by their Babylonian assigned names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel's Babylonian name was Belteshazzar, not to be confused with Belshazzar). Their job specs were as follows: "Children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue [language] of the Chaldeans (Daniel 1.4)."

Nebuchadnezzar himself wrote a chapter in the book of Daniel, not in Hebrew, but in Chaldean.

3. "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet [Isaiah 7.14], saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us (Matthew 1.22-23)."

4. "But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me.. .(Mark 7.11)."

5. "And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull (Matthew 27.33)"; "And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, The place of a skull (Mark 15.22)."

6. "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27.46)" "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me (Mark 15.34)?"

7. Pilate, an international governor, solved a major linguistic problem this way: "And a superscription also was written over him [the Lord Jesus Christ] in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS (Luke 23.38)."

8. "Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou (John 1.38)?"

9. "He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ (John 1.41)."

10. "...when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone (John 1.42)."

11. "Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches (John 5.2)." It helps John's Gentile readers to know what Bethesda means and what and where it is, if a friend says "Meet me at Bethesda at noon tomorrow." Bethesda was a pool of water in Jerusalem, near the sheep market.

12. Bethesda (Beth-EZ-dah) is not to be confused with Bethsaida (Beth-SAY-dah), a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, around a hundred miles north of Jerusalem. If you read both words alike, as some of our acquaintances do, you might end up a hundred miles from your appointment.

13. "When he [Jesus] had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent). He went his way therefore, and washed, and came

seeing (John 9.6f). " What could be more appropriate than the double intent of Christ's words here: the blind man was sent to a pool named "Sent." We would miss the significance of what Christ said if we were only told he was sent to a pool named Siloam, without knowing what Siloam means.

14. "When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha (John 19.13)." This pavement was not like our asphalt or concrete streets we call pavement. It was a public area where official governmental business was conducted, paved artistically with mosaic tiles.

The Hebrew word Gabbatha does not imply anything so artistic. Gabbatha means a knoll or hill, and that is what the Jews called the place, in Jerusalem where the Roman tribunal met to conduct business.

15. "And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha (John 19.17)." Again, Golgotha is not to be confused with Gabbatha. Luke (23.33) says the place was called Calvary, the only time Calvary is mentioned in the Bible. Calvary is a form of the Greek word *kranion*, from which we get the word cranium, which means the skull, specifically the part that encases the brain.

How many of us realize that when we say somebody "cracked his cranium," we are speaking Greek?

Golgotha, from the Aramaic (*Gulgoitha*) and Hebrew (*Gulgoleth*), is skull, and is so rendered in Judges 9.53 ("And a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to brake his skull") and 2 Kings 9.35 ("And they went to bury her: but they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands").

The human skull, or a "skull and crossbones," or the pirates' flag called "the Jolly Roger," are all recognized symbols of poison and death. All in all, calling this place Golgotha, "the Skull" or "the place of the skull," is a grisly but appropriate name for a place used for torturing men to death on Roman crosses.

16. "And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin (John 19.190." Pilate, internationalist politician that he was, wrote the accusation in the local Hebrew language, the popular Greek, and the official Latin of theRoman Empire. Between the three, he fairly well covered most people who witnessed Christ's crucifixion and could read. His intention was to let all know: This is What will happen to any would-be kings who would dare set themselves up in rivalry against the rulers of the Roman Empire. In writing as he did, Pilate, even as the Bible writers and the King James Translators, had to take into account the various languages of his day.

17. "Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master (John 20.16)." Again, we have accuracy in John's reporting what she said, Rabboni, and accuracy in translating what Rabboni means.

18. "And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood (Acts 1.19)."

19. "And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus...(Acts 4.36)." The prefix Bar- in any Hebrew name means "Son of." Simon Barjona in Matthew 16.17 means "Simon, son of Jonah." Authorities

differ about what "nabas" signifies. One says Barnabas may mean son of Nebo (a Babylonian deity; or the mountain in Moab, possibly named after the Babylonian god); another thinks it is a form of the Hebrew *Bar Nebi*, "son of a prophet." Whatever it originally meant, Luke gives us the common understanding of the name, which is the biblical, inspired meaning: The son of consolation.

20. "Tabitha (a woman's name, not to be confused with *talitha*, above), by interpretation Dorcas (Acts 9.36)." Tabitha is the Hebrew word for a female gazelle. Dorcas is Greek for the same. This was a necessary explanation, then, for those who understood one or the other, Greek or Hebrew, but not both.

21. "And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who [the captain] said, Canst thou speak Greek (Acts 21.37)?" The Roman captain, probably unfamiliar with Hebrew, and thinking Paul could possibly only speak in Hebrew, inquired about a common language.

22. "...Paul stood on the stairs.. .And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue... (And when they heard that he spake in the Hebrew tongue to them, they kept the more silence(Acts 21.40 through 22.2)." The mob whom Paul here addressed thought he was a Gentile-loving traitor who had desecrated the temple and blasphemed the law of Moses. When he spoke to them in Hebrew, these Jews were impressed, curious. They hushed and listened to him. Maybe this fellow isn't so bad after all? The language one uses sometimes makes a critical difference.

23. "... I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?. . . (Acts 26.14)." Is it not significant that the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to Saul of Tarsus in Hebrew? You

will notice the Lord did not say, "Why persecutest thou my people?" or "Why are you persecuting my church?" He said—in Hebrew—" "Why persecutest thou ME?" because when one strikes against one of the Lord's people, it is a direct attack on the Lord Jesus Christ Himself! He spoke in God's language, Hebrew, which demanded Saul's attention and respect. The evidence points to the fact God and Adam spoke in Hebrew in Eden.

24. "And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon (Revelation 9.11)." John gives this angel's name in both languages. Both names mean Destruction. The Greek Old Testament (LXX) agrees; the Hebrew word for destruction (*abaddon*) is so rendered (*apoleia*) in Job 26.6, Psalm 88.11, and Proverbs 15.11.

25. "And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon (Revelation 16.16)." Armageddon comes from the Hebrew words Har Meggidon. Har means mountain, and Megiddon refers to the city of Megiddo, which perches on the hillside looking over the Plain of Esdraelon, the prophesied site of the war of Armageddon.

Megiddo and/or Megiddon means place of rendezvous; In plain English, Armageddon means the place of rendezvous, or the place of the appointed meeting, the place God Himself has appointed to meet and destroy the armies of the antichrist at the end of this present evil age.

Peter and Two Misunderstood Texts

26. "But he began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not this man of whom ye speak (Mark 14.71; Matthew 26.74)." I have heard Arminian preachers accuse Peter of using all sorts of blasphemous, foul, nasty, dirty, vulgar words here to prove he was not a follower of Christ. That is not at all what these texts say he did. The Greek word translated curse is anathema,

which was brought directly into the English. See any good dictionary. It has to do with being cursed or banned in a religious sense, and Peter was saying, "May I be cursed if I know Him; may I be cursed if I am not telling you the truth."

When it says "to swear," the word means the same as when a court of law swears a person in to testify, putting them on their oath to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," which is what Peter was doing. He was swearing on oath to the truth that he did not know Jesus, and may I be cursed if that is not the truth.

27. "So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs (John 21.15)." Here, Christ and Peter used two entirely different Greek words, both rendered "love," but by using the English word love for both words the distinction is lost in the KJV.

Christ used the word *agapas*, which means *divine self-sacrificial love*. Peter replied with the much weaker word *phileo*, which is *neighborly affection*, and from which we get the name of the city, Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love." The essence of their conversation is:

Jesus: Do you love/agapao me?

Peter: Yes, I like/phileo you.

Jesus: Do you love/agapao me?

Peter: Yes, I like/phileo you.

Jesus: Do you really like/phileo me?

It was the Lord's using Peter's own word this third time that broke the apostle's heart.

Summary

No one around here claims to be an expert on biblical languages. To know what a Hebrew or Greek word in the Bible means, go to the experts. Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* is a great tool to have. Along with Berry's *Interlinear Greek New Testament*, Strong is my number one "go to" source when I try to study. My sincere and prayerful recommendation: Go thou and do likewise.