The Rewards of Learning Greek and Hebrew: Discovering the Richness of the Bible in Its Original Languages

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Contents

Part One

HEBREW

There's Adam, and Then There's ʾ*adam*

> I must confess that I find it difficult to engage in theological presentations that have not been purged through the fire of careful exegesis.[1]

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Genesis 1:26–27 is rightly quoted in a wide array of religious and secular contexts, from political speeches, to advertisements, to human rights manifestos. We are created in God's image, and this affords us significant dignity and value that is not shared with the rest of creation, despite its goodness (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, etc.). Across the translations, our English Bibles convey with clarity humanity's God-given dignity. However, there are important grammatical features in Gen 1:26–27 that impact how we interpret the relationships between Adam, humanity, male, and female in Gen 1:26–28. Regrettably, these features have gone largely unnoticed by most of our English Bibles.

The ESV translates Gen 1:26–27 as follows:

26Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all

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1. Bruce K. Waltke, "How I Changed My Mind about Teaching Hebrew (or Retained it)," *Crux* 29.4 (1993): 11.

the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." **²⁷**So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

After "man" in v. 26, the ESV includes a footnote alerting the reader that the Hebrew term refers to "mankind." For clarity's sake, both in terms of modern English usage and the author's original intent, it is preferable for "mankind" to be in the body of the text, as in the NIV and NRSV ("humankind"), rather than confining it to a footnote which fewer people will notice. A more significant issue, however, lies in the following verse. God creates "man" in his (God's) image. Does "man" here refer to mankind, as in v. 26, or to the man, Adam? It is ambiguous in most English Bibles. The Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV), the Geneva Bible (GB), and Young's Literal Translation (YLT) opted for the latter, as reflected in their translations, "God created (EHV, GB)/prepareth (YLT) the man in his (own) image . . ." (v. 27).

What informs our understanding of "man" in v. 27a is the translation of the following pronoun, "him" in v. 27b, "in the image of God he created *him*," as most English Bibles render it. However, there is another way to understand the Hebrew that remains faithful to the text and conveys its meaning lucidly in modern English:

> **²⁶**God said, "Let us create humanity in our image, according to our likeness. Let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and over the beasts, and over all the earth, and over everything that creeps on the earth." **²⁷**So God created humanity² in his image. In the image of God he created it. Male and female he created them. **²⁸**Then God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the skies and over all living creatures that creep on the earth." (author's translation)

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2. The use of "humanity" here instead of "man" will be explained in the following paragraphs.

The confusion in the English translations results from the fact that the Hebrew term ʾadam refers both to "humanity" and to the individual man, Adam. Which meaning the author intends must be inferred from the context, which is usually but not always determinative.

Further complicating the issue is that the addition of the definite article ("the") to ʾadam, in Gen 1:27 (ha-ʾadam), does not limit the meaning to "the man," as might be expected by an English-speaking audience. Instead, the Hebrew definite article (as in English) can be used anaphorically. For example, "I bought a new book today. When I finish reading the book, you may borrow it." The first sentence uses the indefinite article, "a" in "a book," but the second sentence refers to "*the* book." Because the first sentence mentions the book, the reader or listener knows to which book the second sentence refers—the book in the previous sentence. Hebrew exhibits this same use of the definite article. Gen 1:3–4 states, "And God said, 'Let there be *light* (ʾor),' and there was light. And God saw *the light* (ha-ʾor), that it was good . . ." In Gen 18:7–8 Abraham takes "*a calf*" (baqar), but in the following verse the narrator refers to it as "*the calf*" (hab-baqar). The book of Ruth begins by introducing Elimelech and his family. In Ruth 1:1, he is ". . . *a man* (ʾish) of Bethlehem in Judah" but Ruth 1:2 uses the definite article, "The name of *the man* (ha-ʾish) was Elimelech." As a final example, 1 Sam 6:3 refers to *a* guilt offering (ʾasham), but in v. 4 the narrator identifies it as *ha-ʾasham*, "*the* guilt offering."

Returning to Gen 1:26, God says, "Let us create humanity (ʾadam)," with no definite article preceding the object. This phrase is followed by, "So God created humanity (ha-ʾadam)." Like the examples above, the second occurrence of ʾadam likely includes the definite article because the object was mentioned in the previous verse, not because it is referring to Adam. In other words, the author probably intends, "Let us create humanity . . . so God created the humanity." In English, however, "humanity" is an uncountable noun, of which there is only one. Adding a definite article in English would be superfluous.

How do we explain the masculine pronoun "him" in v. 27, which suggests that "man" in "So God created man (ha-ʾadam)" refers to "*the* man" rather than "(the) humanity"? The Hebrew word translated

"him" (ʾotho) also represents the third *common* singular pronoun, "it." If the author used the definite article on *ha-ʾadam* anaphorically, then the pronoun *ʾotho* refers to humanity, not to the man, Adam. We should thus translate Gen 1:26–28 as:

> **26**God said, "Let us create humanity in our image, according to our likeness. Let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and over the beasts, and over all the earth, and over everything that creeps on the earth." **27**So God created humanity in his image. In the image of God he created it. Male and female he created them. **28**Then God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the skies and over all living creatures that creep on the earth." (author's translation)

This translation suits the grammar and the context far better than most traditional renderings of this passage. In v. 26, God pronounces that he will create humanity (ʾadam) and that together they will rule over the earth and its creatures. In the following verse, he fulfills that pronouncement. God creates humanity in his image. The author then repeats the statement for emphasis, with the prepositional phrase fronted for additional stress: "*In the image of God* he created it." Both sentences state the same idea. The emphasis is on God's creation of humanity *as its own class,* as a creature distinct from the birds, sea life, and land animals. Male and female announces the two types of humans within the class. To read these verses as supporting male hierarchy or superiority, as some have done, is to ignore the Hebrew grammar.

Although our English translations are reliable and trustworthy, they are not perfect. Translation always involves interpretation. Understanding Hebrew grammar gives us insight into the interpretive choices translators face so that we can think critically and carefully about the options. Further, because the Bible informs our thinking and practice, we want to understand it well. Hebrew helps us plumb the depths of God's self-revelation in ways that are simply inaccessible in translation. Although learning Hebrew can be arduous, it is

a delightful and rewarding adventure. It brings you closer to God's word and to God himself!
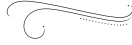
Life is fast. From lands scattered with fast-food to commercials filled with the fastest internet speeds, we crave haste. Ancient languages don't mix well with our appetite. I've had the opportunity to study, teach, and write on ancient Hebrew for over a decade. There are many benefits and blessings to reading the Bible in Hebrew, but my favorite is pace. Vowels, dots, un-Englished sounds, un-Anglicized word order, they can cause a student to move slowly. While I can now read Hebrew texts quite quickly, the language still has the ability to make me amble. This slowing down seeps into many corners of my life. I become more attuned to the people, the beauty, and the disparities around me. The music is heard. Not only that, my unhurried state lets me actually savor the Scriptures. I can think on words more carefully, more slowly in their context and in due course my own life, my faith community, and the culture at large. I'm forever grateful to have constant access to a de-accelerant in a hurried world.

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Part Two

GREEK

Proximity and Disorientation

The Greek New Testament will surprise you and chal-
lenge you and make you feel at times like you've never
read the passage in your entire life.

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T he title of this book implies that learning to read the Greek of
the New Testament is worth the investment of time and effort.
As someone who has done so and has been reading Greek texts
for more than forty years, I can attest to this. But describing the ben-
efits for an audience that has not yet taken up the challenge, for whom
it still is "Greek to me," is another matter. I can insist that a reading
knowledge of the biblical languages grants a degree of access to the
biblical texts that reading translations alone cannot. This is of course
true. Demonstrating that fact is likewise another matter. Attempts to
make such a case on the basis of fine points of Greek grammar and
syntax are likely to be more puzzling than elucidating, unless you are
already on the inside of the language. In fact, such matters are usually
taken up in advanced Greek exegesis courses.

What will follow, then, will be two kinds of demonstrations.
Half of my argument is of a general nature, based on overarching
considerations that might apply to learning any language, though
I will make these cases on the basis of specific examples from the
Greek NT. The other half of my argument will consist of examples
of some of the more accessible literary tactics employed by NT
authors to add force, insistence, color, interest, and so on to their

message. I'll ask you to imagine the effects created by certain figures of speech—"imagine" because the effects produced by language games are usually language-specific. You won't be able to "feel" all the force because the rules of their communicative dynamics are culturally shaped. But I think you'll get the idea, and I think you'll come away from one passage or another of the NT with a new sense of its intended impact and how reading the Greek text is a dive beneath the surface of the translation to original figures and structures of speech that create such impact.

Comparison of the Greek text with English translations is inevitable in this sort of exercise. However, the intention is not to do a critical analysis of any given English translation or of translations in general. The idea is rather to work from what is familiar to that which is unfamiliar and, in the process, to make the features of the unfamiliar visible (word patterns, rhetorical structures, "texture"), and consider how they "work" in the making of meaning. Having said this, and with full awareness that the vast majority of Christians today access the Bible through translation, if you are in fact interested in biblical studies, translations can only take you so far. To assess the scholarly work of others and to engage in it directly requires knowledge of Hebrew and Greek.

Finally, before making a proper start, some might suggest from the declining investment in the liberal arts, or declining interest in the biblical languages in seminaries and divinity programs, or the increasing "fluency" of the language modules of Bible software, or some combination of these, that an argument for the importance of studying the biblical languages to the point of reading competence is a rather quaint notion. But to go out on a limb here, I'd be willing to bet that it is those who have studied the biblical languages who take the most and best advantage of the language modules of today's Bible software. After all, they know the right questions to ask, the most significant searches to undertake. In any case, among the church's missional responsibilities in this ever more complicated world, the study of the Scriptures is central. Those suitably equipped are tasked to identify and define the earliest trajectories of thought about God and godly behavior and to extend them into today's various situations.

Biblical studies remains an unfinished task, and reading the biblical languages is the foundation of the task.

When the Text Invites You In

In this opening reflection, partly invitation, partly provocation, I will describe two overarching benefits of studying Koine Greek. They come out of my experience, but friends and colleagues in the field will corroborate what I say.

Proximity

In John 1:50–51, the last verses of the chapter and the closing comments of the three-part section in which he begins to call his disciples, Jesus concludes his fascinating conversation with Nathanael. I will forego the details here, but essentially, Jesus surprised the would-be disciple by describing where he had been (under the fig tree) before Philip had even gotten to him. Nathanael, on the spot, confessed his faith in Jesus as Son of God, King of Israel. Jesus responded:

> "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." (John 1:50)

Now, the Greek reader encounters a surprise in the next verse (John 1:51). In the unfolding story, Jesus, in addressing Nathanael, consistently uses either the singular, second-person pronoun "you" (four times) or a verb in the second-person singular in reference to Nathanael (two times: "Do *you* believe?"; "*you* will see"). The point is, all the "yous" are singular, referring to Nathanael. So, too, when the narrator takes over to introduce Jesus' closing comment to Nathanael, he refers to Nathanael in the singular, "And he [Jesus] said to *him*." But as Jesus continues, he shifts from the expected singular "you" to the plural "you": "Very truly, I tell *you* [plural], *you* will see [second person plural verb] heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51). The NRSV, minus my insertions, looks like this: "Very truly, I tell you,* you will

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see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

What is the meaning of this surprising shift from "you" singular to "you" plural? First, let us observe the ambiguity that exists in the case of English, which in fact might be carried over in an English translation, obscuring a literary subtlety. (Many other modern languages have separate singular and plural "yous" like Greek; in English, the only way we have of conveying this is by saying "y'all" or "you guys.") Translations that provide marginal notes or footnotes, such as the NRSV, will point out the shift, but to what effect?[1]

The shift in number creates a shock, a disturbance for the initial listening audience (the first audience of the Fourth Gospel "heard" this story) and any subsequent reading audience. What this does is open the Nathanael story, and indeed the entire narrative of the Fourth Gospel. It lets the audience in, in a way similar to the comment near the end of the Gospel (20:30–31) in which the narrator shifts from the narratival third person to address the plural "you":

> **30**Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. **31**But these are written so that *you* may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing *you* may have life in his name.

The literary effect in each case is like the "breaking through the fourth wall" technique of theater and film in which a performer, by turning to and addressing the audience directly, closes the distance between story and audience, inviting those outside the story to enter within and make it their own. If we imagine a story as having space, texture, and topography, this move turns a two-dimensional narrative into a three- (or multi-) dimensional story in which an outsider may become to some degree an insider.

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1. A scholarly explanation for this shift is to suggest that the "Very truly" saying has been taken from another source, in which the plural was appropriate, and inserted by the author at this point without adaptation. And, as far as sources go, this may be correct. However, it does not address the matter of narrative development or audience effect.

It might be argued that the notes provided in some translations grant sufficient access to the shift in number. Yes, belatedly and in terms of information. But in terms of reading experience and response, a footnote is secondary to the text-experience itself (and in fact capable only of producing its own kind of effect): like the difference between being part of an exclusive group of friends invited personally by an esteemed host and a second-tier group whose invitation is a "note to all" posted on the break-room bulletin board.

Reading the Greek text of the NT, I will try to demonstrate, brings us that much closer to original audiences. We cannot close the distance completely—the Fourth Gospel was not written to me; it was written to some other original audience. But the Greek text presented an opening, broke through the fourth wall, and allowed greater proximity to the story.

Disorientation, Defamiliarizing, and "The Art of Reading Slowly"

Another overarching benefit of learning to read biblical Greek might be described, surprisingly, in terms of the disorientation and disruption it involves. What has been familiar territory, easily traversed— your English Bible—has suddenly, in Greek, become a wild, unknown frontier that takes painstaking effort to move through at all. This is something of what it is like to begin to learn Greek. And if I'm being honest, this slow, plodding, and often frustrating aspect of the early stages of language learning is a frequent deterrent to taking on the challenge in the first place.

There are no mother-tongue speakers of NT Greek (despite the protestations of my Greek friends and colleagues). So, learning to read it is an unnatural activity that will for some time involve moving more slowly and thoroughly through the biblical text than one might if reading the same text in a mother tongue. "Reading slowly" in this sense is reading with fuller awareness, a kind of "close reading" with eyes wide open, alert to details. As you learn the details of Greek grammar and syntax and begin to appreciate the unique impact created through the sound, rhythm, figures of speech, and idiomatic expressions, you become more sensitive, not only to what

is said, but also to what is *not* said. A text most familiar and tame in your English Bible, now in Greek, ripples with freshness, disturbing the status quo. You will never look upon your English Bible in quite the same way—you come to know "too much" to be fully satisfied with translations. But this is a wonderful frustration. Nothing like a little disruption to blow out the dust and cobwebs of what has become all too routine.

The reading and interpretation of literary texts, including those written in biblical Greek, is not a precise science but really more of an art or a craft. If your goal is to be an interpreter of the New Testament text, acquisition of a reading knowledge of Greek and learning the art of reading closely and slowly are prerequisites. The New Testament is entering its third millennium of scholarly interpretation, and to critically assess the contributions of those who have gone before, one must follow the Greek and tread the interpretive trails already blazed. But the Greek text itself, read today in conversation with what we are still learning about ancient culture, politics, and art, promises still more treasures for those who are able to read it with understanding.
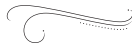
Reading in Hebrew and Greek makes me slow down and really drink in Scripture. And, I believe, the languages make me a more responsible interpreter and proclaimer of God's word. Every moment learning Hebrew and Greek has been time well spent.

Abram Kielsmeier-Jones, Pastor