

Straight to the Highest Authority

"If I do not know the meaning of the language... the speaker [shall be] a foreigner to me." (1 Corinthians 14:11)

In one of my favorite cartoons from *Leadership magazine* (I have lost the reference), two choir members seated behind the pulpit of a church are looking over the shoulders of the pastor who is preaching to his congregation. To their right as they look out onto the congregation, they see the sea of somber faces of the audience who is *listening* to his sermon. But to their left, as they peer over the shoulders of a deaf interpreter *signing* the sermon to the remainder who *cannot hear*, they notice that they are rolling over in the aisles with laughter. The very sight leads the one choir member to whisper to the other, *"I think the deaf interpreter is adlibbing again."*

Of course their contrasting responses to the same sermon hint that the original message was either lost or confused somewhere in the transmission. While certain people that morning may have enjoyed the hilarity of the moment, something stood between them and the capturing of the main point! To my point, while translators from one language *may* partially convey the original message to speakers of a different language, they cannot do so exhaustively. Something will be lost in that communication. This reality should not disturb us. My point in writing is not to decry the challenge of speaking cross-culturally. To the contrary, we have good reasons to do the hard work that celebrating differences between members of differing languages and cultures demands. So I write instead to encourage recognition that these challenges exist so that we give the required attention to assuring we understand the speaker of another language as best we can. Attitudes both of haste and laziness can easily get in the way of successful communication cross-culturally.

For Christians, the endeavor to understand the opening chapters of Genesis is a significant cross-cultural challenge. My purpose in writing this, I repeat, is not to discourage my readers. Of the two main original languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, I am far more comfortable with the latter. I have had formal study of both, but far less so of the former. Indeed the benefit I gain from my comfort with the Greek New Testament makes clear how much I have yet to learn from the Hebrew Testament. Nevertheless, with the aid of books, articles and essays by Hebrew speakers, commentaries, an inter-linear Hebrew Old Testament, and serious research, I have matured in my understanding and respect of the language of the opening chapters of Genesis.

I encourage you to read my essay, *"The Biblical Demand to Take Another Look at Genesis 1,"* which you can download from my website at www.christianityontheoffense.com. It is in that article that I share insights, bibliographical materials, and web addresses to assist you in your own journey to understand the relevant questions about that text. The bottom line is that, because the Book of Genesis was first written in Hebrew, English readers must not uncritically rely solely on English *translations* for taking dogmatic positions on the creation days of Genesis 1. People have expressed concerns directly to me that it is too difficult for the lay person to check the facts for themselves. To those who may be weary, I assure you that my research can be easily checked against the original text for accuracy. What this means for you is that you can investigate for yourselves the claims I make in my writings (with tools I mention above). I am an open book with nothing to hide in these matters. So I invite you to delve into the evidence for yourself. The bottom line in all of this is that, for the person who is interested in these questions, hard work simply cannot be avoided.

On this issue it is highly significant how far afield popular English translations can deviate from the original Hebrew manuscript in both vocabulary and grammar. To be specific I quote in endnote 5 of my own work, *"The Biblical Demand to Take Another Look,"* in order to lay out ten specific examples,

almost all of which have a direct bearing on the correct interpretation of the creation days of Genesis. On this issue for example, it is highly significant how far afield popular English translations can deviate from the original Hebrew manuscript in both vocabulary and grammar. To be specific I quote in endnote 5 of my own work, *"The Biblical Demand to Take Another Look,"* where I lay out ten specific examples, almost all of which have a direct bearing on the correct interpretation of the creation days of Genesis:

"The importance of this question [the interpretation of the days of Genesis] is heightened by the controversial nature of the texts at hand. I highlight the ESV (English Standard Version) because it is representative of a host of other popular translations. Although the ESV bills itself as "*an essentially literal*" Bible translation that is "*carefully weighed against the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek to ensure the fullest accuracy*" (The Lutheran Study Bible English Standard Version. (Concordia Publishing, 2009), p.XV.), the following details raise important challenges concerning that claim: **1)** In Genesis 1:2 the decisive conjunction, "*and*," is missing even though it is both present in the Hebrew text, and is studiously included, as the Hebrew demands, everywhere else in the English translation of Genesis 1. **2)** In Gen. 1:5, two errors are involved. First there should be no definite article since it is not present in the Hebrew. Also, the term "*first day*" should instead be translated "*day "1"*" since it is a cardinal number, not ordinal. **3,4,5,6)** There should **not** be a definite article ("*the*") for days 2 through 5 since it is omitted in the Hebrew. They should instead be translated as "*a second day...*, *a third day...*," etc. **7)** In Gen. 2:4b the definite article ("*the earth and the heavens*".) is used twice even though it is **not** present in the Hebrew. **8,9)** Although the ESV translates Exodus 20:11 and 31:17 as "*For in six days*," the Hebrew text does not include the preposition "*in*" (as in "*within*"). It only appears in the *English* translation (of inter-linear texts) inside brackets []. The Hebrew text literally says, "*For six days God made...*" While this necessary excision does not nullify the aspect of time altogether, it does suggest that the exact duration involved was not the *central* point of the statement. In any case the actual text cannot bear the weight young-earth creationists place upon it (see p.5, above). **10)** In Daniel 8:26, the Hebrew text does **not** employ plural nouns, but singular ones, thereby actually saying, "*the vision of the evening and the morning*" (note articles). This point is significant for the reason that young-earth creationists consistently argue that the "*evening...morning*" refrain signals the "bound[ing]" of expressly *24-hour* days (the LSB (above), note on Genesis 1:5). I reply to the contrary that in this instance the span of time recalled in the singular "*evening*" and "*morning*" vision in Daniel 8:26 actually spans several centuries, as implied earlier in 8:20,21."

It is not sufficient, however, for you to merely become aware of these deviations. It is important that you finish my essay with an eye on the ramifications for interpretation that follow from each of them.

The consequences that follow from the failure to consult the Hebrew are not limited, however, to adherents of the evangelical end of the investigational spectrum. While my blog postings make clear my serious disagreements with my brothers and sisters in Christ who, relying on English translations, insist that the creation days of Genesis are 24-hour, others also commit this same error. Certain scientists too (especially committed to naturalism), consistently dismiss the record of Genesis creation account for the very same reason as do Christian fundamentalists. To be clear here, I am not suggesting these scientists *personally* believe the creation periods are that short. I am saying they believe (wrongly) that that interpretation is what the Book of Genesis actually intends.

In his essay, "*Genesis, Cosmology, and Evolution*," Rabbi Hillel Goldberg (obviously a Hebrew speaker!) challenges Charles Darwin's attempted disproof of the Genesis account and his consequent assertion that he thereby logically disproved the God of the Bible. In doing so he first of all states,

"The only readers who take the Torah both literally and uni-dimensionally... are non-Hebrew readers. The simplicity ascribed to the Biblical account of creation

within Western culture is not and never has been a part of the intellectual heritage of even the most Orthodox Jewish believers...For millennia, the [Hebrew] interpreter of the Torah has lived congenially with the multiple denotations and connotations of Hebrew words, phrases, and themes. Indeed, he has gloried in them, without, however, violating the plain sense of the text — without twisting its clear intent. If a reader lets Genesis be Genesis, not a translated stultification thereof, Genesis is scientifically accurate.” And then, to the point, he concludes, *“The Genesis that Darwin [attempted to disprove] **does not exist**, the English renderings he refuted **do not**, in critical details, **reflect the Hebrew**”* (boldface mine). See <http://www.ou.org/publications/ja/5760summer/genesis.pdf>. (boldface and ellipses are mine).

Martin Luther himself placed great importance on a high level of awareness of the original biblical languages, especially for Christian preachers and teachers. Looking back on the history of the church from his perspective, he writes, *“Without the languages [the original Hebrew and Greek] we could not have received the Gospel we could not have received the Gospel...If we neglect [the same] we shall eventually lose the Gospel...In former times the fathers were frequently mistaken, because they were ignorant of the languages... although their doctrine is good, they have often erred in the real meaning of the sacred text; they are without arms against error, and I fear much that their faith will not remain pure.”* W. Carlos Martyn. The Life and Times of Martin Luther. (American Tract Society, 1866), p.474,475. See also Luther’s extensive discussion of this matter in Walter Brandt, ed. Luther’s Works v.45. (Fortress, 1962), p.359f.

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