

The Greek Language and the Christian Ministry

F.F. Bruce

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Christian theology is based upon the firm belief that God; the Maker of heaven and earth, has revealed Himself to mankind as a righteous God and a Saviour, and that this revelation, at first conveyed partially and variously through those whom He called to be His spokesmen, has been perfectly communicated in Jesus Christ His Son. The preparatory and consummating stages of the revelation have been recorded respectively in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. To these sacred writings, Evangelical theology in particular attaches unique importance, believing that they constitute the standard of faith and practice, that they contain all things necessary for salvation, and that nothing must be pressed upon men as of the essence of Christian belief and life which cannot be established from them.

The Christian theologian, particularly if he calls himself Evangelical, must therefore pay the most painstaking attention to these writings. He must realize that sound theology rests upon true exegesis, and true exegesis requires a number of preliminary disciplines, of which linguistic study and textual criticism are two of the most important. The Biblical theologian—and do we not all call ourselves Biblical theologians nowadays!—cannot be content with a second-hand approach to his foundation documents, by reading them in another man's translation. He will, no doubt, consult and value many translations, but he will wish to control them by regular, direct reference to the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts.

"True," says one reader, "true so far as the theological specialist is concerned. But I am no theological specialist; I have no ambition but to be a parish clergyman, charged with the cure of souls. I have neither the time nor perhaps the inclination to pursue linguistic study."

But, my friend, that very vocation to which your life is dedicated, makes you a theological specialist. Not a theological specialist among theologians, admittedly, but a theological specialist among laymen. To whom should your parishioners turn for an expert ruling on some point of theological or Biblical interpretation if not to you, their true pastor? Must you, like them, depend on other men's translations and other men's explanations for an answer? No doubt you will have access to many more translations and explanations than they; but your answer will still, in some important respects, be **second-hand**.

Moreover, your ministry (for I speak to Evangelicals) is preeminently the ministry of the Word of God. The Reformed Pastor can write no more honourable letters after his name than V.D.M.—*Verbi Divini Minister*. Week by week you are called upon to preach the Word, and the preaching of the Word inevitably involves

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the exposition of Holy Scriptures. You may surround yourself in your study with a collection of helps in this work—the best versions and concordances and so on; but nothing will stand you in such good stead as the regular study of the sacred text in the original tongues. The Minister who keeps up his study of Hebrew and Greek has an advantage over his colleague who lets them go, such as a man with normal vision has over one who is colour-blind. There

are shades of meaning which are immediately obvious to the reader of the original texts; but which the best versions or commentaries can never adequately reproduce.

For our present purpose, let us confine ourselves to the Greek language.

When you learn to read the New Testament in the original text, you open for yourself a gateway to one of the richest treasuries of literature in all the world. When Mr. E. K. Simpson delivered his Tyndale New Testament Lecture for 1944 on "Words Worth weighing in the Greek New Testament"¹, he began with these words:

No competent judge can dispute the claim of Greek to preeminence in any congress of languages, ancient or modern. In its golden prime, it presents an unrivalled combination of elegance and vigour, of variety of style and precision of statement. 'The instrument responds,' remarks Jebb, 'with happy elasticity to every demand of the Greek intellect'. And when we call to mind the felicities of its characteristic idioms, the repleteness of its syntax, the intricate harmonies of its prosody, and the sonorous cadences of its stater prose, or reflect on the copious invention exhibited in its teeming vocabulary; and then bethink ourselves of the monumental longevity of the tongue, the siege of time it has sustained without capitulation; the title of Greek to homage in any symposium of the commonwealth of letters must be fully conceded.

"But, wait a minute," you say, "you are going too far afield. If I learn some Greek, it is in order that I may read the New Testament in the original; I can see the usefulness of recognizing Greek words sufficiently to look them up in a lexicon, or follow a discussion on their meanings in commentaries such as those of Lightfoot or Westcott; but I have no desire to read Homer or Herodotus in the original. Let those who care for secular literature go in for them, but I propose to be what you have just told me I ought to be—a minister of the Word of God."

Well, so be it. You wish to know Greek sufficiently well to follow the account given of a word in a lexicon or the discussion of its meaning given in Lightfoot or Westcott. You are studying the Epistle to the Colossians and you come to verse 19 of chapter 1: "For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell "as the R.V. renders it—with the marginal alternative: "For the whole fulness of God was pleased to dwell in Him". The term "fulness" plainly has some special significance

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here, and you wish to find out exactly what its meaning is. You have a lexicon within arm's reach—perhaps Grimm-Thayer—for you have been told by someone that Liddell and Scott, superb as it is for the Classical tongue, is hardly adequate for New Testament study—and Lightfoot's commentary lies open on your desk. You know that the Greek word which Paul uses for "fulness" is "*pleroma*", so you turn up "*pleroma*" in Grimm-Thayer. The first thing you are told is that the noun comes from the verb "*pleroō*"; next you are told that it is "Sept.". (What does that mean? Ah, Septuagint!) for something or other in Hebrew letters (so it pays to know at least the Hebrew alphabet even when looking up a Greek word in a lexicon of New Testament Greek). Then you have a couple of quotations from a pagan Greek author to illustrate the etymological force of the noun, and further down, the various shades of New Testament usage are illustrated by reference to the Septuagint, to pagan Greek authors and to

¹ Now online: http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/words_simpson.pdf

a Jewish Greek author. How do you propose to make use of these references? Perhaps Lightfoot will help you. You see in his footnote to the text that he has a detached note on "*pleroma*". You turn it up and find that it runs to seventeen pages (pages 257-273) and reproduces far more quotation from non-Biblical Greek than Grimm-Thayer's entry did. In fact, the more Greek you know, the more you will be able to profit by Lightfoot's note. And that means that the more Greek you know, the more sensitive and accurate will be your appreciation of the meaning of this word in the context here.

You cannot, in fact, understand one small book in any language without knowing more about the language than is contained in that small book. One meets at times with laborious discussions of the meaning of some word by a painstaking student who has followed the "concordant" method. He has mechanically traced its usage through the New Testament and perhaps through the Septuagint as well, and cannot see that any more light could be thrown upon it. But it is all too evident to anyone who has something of a feeling for the language, that much of this labour is wasted, because the man knows individual vocables but does not know Greek. He tells us confidently, for example, that the words at the end of II Thessalonians 2. 7 ("until he be taken out of the way", R.V.) do not mean what the ordinary translations suggest, because he has looked up each word in the clause and studied its usage, and knows that they can only mean "until out of the midst he (or it) comes to pass". Yes, he knows Greek words, but he does not know Greek; if he did, he would know that the words in this particular grouping constitute an idiomatic expression meaning exactly what the A.V. and the R.V. say. He will recognize such an idiom for what it is more readily if he has read some other Greek beside the New Testament. To take an analogy from a parallel line of study, we admit at once that casual historical allusions in the New Testament can only be understood against the historical background of New

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Testament times. For example, we appreciate the part played by the various rulers bearing the name of Herod in the New Testament when we know the relationship which they bore to one another and to other members of the same family who are mentioned in the Gospel and Acts; and this information is accessible in our historical sources. Similarly we appreciate various linguistic and other cultural features in the New Testament against its linguistic and cultural environment. How readily the idiom of Greek athletic life springs to the lips of Paul! And how much easier it is for us to appreciate the force of such language when we know something from general Greek literature about the part played by the athletic contests in the Greek world! And the same applies to other classes of words which we meet in the Greek New Testament. "In order to attain a sure result," said a New Testament lexicographer of an earlier day, Hermann Cremer, "we must consult linguistic usage" (although Cremer himself did not have such a wide field of consultation open to him as we have). Readers of Mr. E. K. Simpson's Tyndale Lecture already referred to, or of his commentary on the Pastoral Letters, will know something of the rich harvest which the student of New Testament usage may reap from the Hellenistic literature of the general period to which the New Testament itself belongs.

But the key which opens the door to the Greek New Testament fits the lock of another treasure-house with which the student and expositor of Scripture ought to make himself familiar. That treasure-house is the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible produced at Alexandria in the closing centuries B.C. The student of the Old Testament, whether he is a Hebraist or a non-Hebraist, cannot afford to overlook the Septuagint, because

it bears witness to at least one form of the text and interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures current in the period immediately preceding the birth of Christianity. But the student of the New Testament must equally come to terms with the Septuagint. For although it was not (as is sometimes claimed) the Bible of Our Lord, it was the Bible of the first Greek-speaking Christians, and it is the Bible which is commonly quoted by the writers of the New Testament. If we think it necessary to become acquainted with the Greek that was being written and spoken around the New Testament period, in order to possess a context within which we may read New Testament Greek more intelligently, it is specially necessary to pay attention to the Greek of the Septuagint. One of the great Septuagint scholars of the nineteenth century, Mr. E. W. Grinfield, declared: "Whoever studies the Greek New Testament in conjunction with the Septuagint, will obtain such a conception of the unity of the Bible, as never could be obtained from the study of two discordant languages". Nothing in this statement should be taken as detracting from the importance of the study of the Old Testament in the original Hebrew; the value of the statement lies in emphasizing the

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contribution which the Septuagint can make to the study of the New Testament.

The men who first preached the Gospel in Greek, found their task considerably eased because they did not have to invent a new theological vocabulary. The vocabulary which they required lay ready to hand in the Septuagint. Many of the terms which they used had a pagan connotation when they occurred in a Greek religious context, but the translators of the Septuagint had already taken several of these terms and given them a new meaning by using them as the equivalents of the great words of Hebrew revelation. So when Paul and Barnabas and others addressed synagogue audiences of Greek-speaking Jews and God-fearers, and used such terms in setting forth their Gospel, they used them not in the pagan sense, but in a sense with which their hearers had already become familiar through the Septuagint. For example, the Greek word "*hilas komai*" and its cognates, were used in a setting of paganism to denote the appeasing of the wrath of some capricious power by offering him a gift or enduring his vengeance or the like. But in the Septuagint, where these words are used to represent the Hebrew "*kipper*" and its cognates, we are confronted with something in which God takes the initiative, something which God provides. Thus, in that classic passage, Leviticus 17. 11, the Septuagint runs: "For the life of all flesh is its blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make propitiation (*'exilaskesthai*') for your lives". Mark the words "*I have given it*". And mark, too, how they are echoed in Romans 3. 23 ff.: "Christ Jesus; whom God set forth to be a propitiation (*'hilasterion*') through faith, by his blood". These are new idioms which paganism could not use—a God who actually provides the propitiation which He requires! But the idioms were less abrupt in that first age of the Gospel than they might have been, because the Septuagint translators had introduced them first.

"But can't I find all this in other men's books? Need I work it all out for myself from the Greek New Testament and the Septuagint?" Be well assured, you will read those other books with greater understanding and enjoyment—such a book, for example, as Dr. Leon Morris' *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*—if you keep your Greek Testament and Septuagint beside you for constant reference. And another thing: never take any statement about Greek usage for granted, no matter who makes it. Always verify your references—and not only your own but other men's as well! If your College library takes the *Westminster Theological Journal* (and if it doesn't, it should), you will see what I mean, if you look up a forty-page article in the issue for May 1955, entitled "C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation".

The regular and careful study of the Greek Testament for yourself is one of the chief ways in which you may "commend yourself to God as a workman who, because of his straightforward dealing with

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the word of truth, has no reason to feel any shame" (II Timothy 2. 15, Weymouth).

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