

The Use of Greek in Biblical Interpretation

T. David Gordon

(Illustration of tools: they make a task safer, and more *efficient*. They do not guarantee the success of the project; nor are they substitutes for wisdom, diligence, etc.)

I. Introduction.

A. In all questions of interpretation, the issue is not: will doing this or knowing this guarantee a correct interpretation. Communication, and therefore, interpretation, is a complex and difficult task. There are no guarantees that we will understand a text correctly. The issue is: Have we been faithful in our attempt to represent what God has said (1 Cor. 15:15)? The primary moral issue in interpretation is not whether I can justify my interpretation to myself, or to others, but to God, whose Spirit inspired the Holy Scriptures. In the same sense that ultimately I am responsible to Robert Frost for my interpretations of his poetry, I am responsible to God to understand His revelation. The secondary issue is justifying an interpretation before others, demonstrating to them that the conclusions we have reached are sound, so that they may make a reasoned judgment, “testing all things, holding fast what is good.”

B. Granting this understanding of the interpretive process, then, I believe all “rules” of interpretation are commended for two reasons.

1. First, some rules are designed negatively, to help us avoid *mis*interpreting. It is easy to say that a given interpretation is wrong; it is less easy to say that another is right.

2. Second, some rules are designed for the sake of efficiency, because they bring speed and organization to the process.

a. Illustration: Ephesians 4:11-12

A knowledge of Greek protects you from the assumption, perfectly justified on the basis of some English texts, that the “work of the ministry” is done by “the saints.” A knowledge of Greek quickly takes you farther than will a consideration of representative commentaries, and quickly brings you to two conclusions:

a-the most likely reading of this text is that the three purpose clauses share a common subject, the implied “gifted ones.”

b-that, *if* Paul were intending here to communicate that the “work of the ministry” is done by the saints, he has done so very poorly.

Consequence: An individual *could* not become convinced of “lay ministry” on the basis of the Greek text of *this* passage. It is certainly not denied by the text (and may be affirmed by others), but it is not affirmed by this text either.¹

b. Illustration: The “Great Commission.” Discipling (not “going” or evangelizing) is the primary point of the text (the only imperative), and

¹ For a full discussion of the issues associated with Ephesians 4, see my “Equipping Ministry in Ephesians 4?” in *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, no. 1 (March 1994): 69-78.

“baptizing” and “teaching...to observe” are partial definitions of what discipling consists of. “Going” is the least significant verb in the text.

c. Illustration three: The break at Ephesians 5:22. Many English translations find the sentence that constitutes verses 18-24 to be too long, and so they break it into components, beginning a new sentence at verse 22: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” (KJV). But there is no verb in verse 22 in the original. The original says, “wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord,” borrowing its verb from the previous verse, “being submissive to one another...” Some English translations go further in this erroneous direction by adding a little sub-heading before verse 22, saying something like “Wives and husbands,” as though Paul were beginning not only a new sentence, but a new paragraph. No such confusion is possible in the original.

C. Thus, using Greek is like using any other tool. Potentially, it assists us in avoiding mistakes, and in discovering comparatively quickly what God has revealed in his Word. It also assists us in knowing *why* we have reached our conclusions, and on how *firm* a foundation. It *assists* us (but does not guarantee anything) in our task of “testing all things.” The “negative” dimension of this should not be underestimated. One would think we would be especially cautious about bringing upon ourselves the condemnation associated with teaching (James 3:1 “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness”), and with misrepresenting God.

II. Particular advantages of knowing Greek

A. Primary literature

1. “Opens” interpretive options. Reading the original Greek often prompts one to consider interpretations that one would not consider if reading only an English translation.

a. The suggestion that Eph. 5:19 (addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart) should be understood as “addressing yourselves,” not “addressing one another,” on the basis of the pronoun *ἑαυτοῦς* being there instead of the anticipated *ἀλλήλων* (and so the KJV, “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”). Possibly, therefore, Eph. 5:19 (and its parallel at Colossians 3:17) has nothing to do with the corporate assemblies of the churches.

b. Rom. 9:32--“Because they pursued it as though it were based on works,” or, “because (it, the Sinai covenant) is characterized by works”. I have argued (*Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 163-66, also available on my site) that there is no verb “pursued” in the original text of Romans 9:32, and that Paul therefore is not saying anything about some possible mis-pursuit of the law by the Israelites, but is rather (as at Gal. 3:12) talking about the law itself.

c. The “guardian” of Gal. 3.24-25. While some servants in Rome were tutors for the children of their masters, and while some were disciplinarians, some were also bodyguards. Knowing this helps us resolve how to understand this figure in Galatians 3 (cf. my “A Note on ΠΑΙΔΑΓΩΓΟΣ in Gal. 3. 24-25.” *New Testament Studies*, 35, no. 1, January, 1989, 150-54).

d. “So” or “thus” (οὕτως) at John 3:16? The KJV translation of this, accurate enough in Elizabethan English, is a little misleading now. To our ears, “God *so* loved the world...” sounds like “God loved the world so much...”, which I judge to be erroneous. The word translated “so” in most translations should be translated “thus,” or “in this manner.” The adverb elsewhere in John's writings is not quantitative (“so much”) but qualitative (“in this manner”), and possibly refers to the event alluded to in Numbers 21 when Moses lifted up the serpent. The point would then be that God loves the world in its sin the way in which he loved the complaining Israelites in their sin in the wilderness. In the very midst of the complaining and rebelling, and in the very midst of God's wrath for that rebellion, God has provided a way of escaping his wrath.

e. Gal.3:10: “All who rely on works of the law are under a curse” or “All who are identified by observing the law are under a curse”? Many ETs add “rely on” here; gratuitously, in my opinion, since it is not in the Greek text, and since the expression in Greek is so evidently parallel to the previous verse “all who are of faith,” where no one translates “all who *rely*

on faith.” (I discuss this more fully in “Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14” in *The Law is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (P&R, 2009), pp. 240-58, esp. pp. 244-45).

2. “Closes” interpretive options.

a. Eph. 4.11-12. The egalitarian, “every-member ministry” interpretation of this would not occur to anyone reading the Greek text.

b. The “missionary” reading of the Great Commission. The imperative, “Go, therefore...”, present in so many ETs (e.g. KJV, RSV, ESV) is not an imperative in Greek. What is commanded, in Greek, is disciple-making, not going. (I discuss this briefly in “Evangelistic Responsibility,” *The Ordained Servant* Volume 18 (June/July, 2009).

3. Provides information not found elsewhere (in commentaries, for instance).

Some information is so obvious to the reader of Greek that a commentary based on Greek will say nothing about it. Yet a commentary based on the English text will say nothing, because it is not based on Greek.

a. Use of “boast” language in Rom. 1-5:

2:17 Εἰ δὲ σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ καὶ ἐπαναπαύῃ νόμῳ καὶ καυχᾶσαι ἐν θεῷ

2:23 ὃς ἐν νόμῳ καυχᾶσαι, διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως τοῦ νόμου τὸν θεὸν ἀτιμάζεις·

3:27 Ποῦ οὖν ἡ καύχησις; ἐξεκλείσθη. διὰ ποίου νόμου; τῶν ἔργων; οὐχί, ἀλλὰ διὰ νόμου πίστεως.

4:2 εἰ γὰρ Ἀβραάμ ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη, ἔχει καύχημα, ἀλλ' οὐ πρὸς θεόν.

5:2 δι' οὗ καὶ τὴν προσαγωγὴν ἐσχήκαμεν [τῇ πίστει] εἰς τὴν χάριν ταύτην ἐν ἣ ἑστήκαμεν καὶ καυχώμεθα ἐπ' ἐλπίδι τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ. 3 οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ καυχώμεθα ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν, εἰδότες ὅτι ἡ θλίψις ὑπομονὴν κατεργάζεται,]

b. Connections between sentences, such as Eph. 5.22 and 2.1,5.

c. Example from OT: Gen. 32:2, “Jacob said, 'This is God's army!' So he called the name of that place Mahanaim (two armies).” Later in the narrative, Jacob divides his caravan into two “companies,” employing the same noun.

4. Provides an enormous *amount* of information rapidly.

B. Secondary literature

1. Gives access to it.

a. Concordances

b. Lexica

c. Commentaries and scholarly articles

d. Good systematic theologies

2. Provides a basis of critical evaluation (Protects from the “big book fallacy”).

III. Things you should know about Greek

A. It is inflected, potentially clarifying English ambiguities

1. Heb. 13:20--“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant” (RSV). Who is “the great shepherd of the sheep”? Is it “the God of peace” or “our Lord Jesus”? The Greek is unambiguous.

2. Matt. 26:27--“ And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it;” (KJV). The Elizabethan English might suggest that the disciples should drink “all of” the wine in the cup; in Greek, the “all” is plainly vocative, and refers to the disciples (“Drink, all of you, from it”) not the cup.

B. It is hupotactic, not syntactic

1. Very long sentences are possible

2. Clauses are capable of being subordinated or coordinated with great precision

3. The chapter divisions in the Bible sometimes confuse this (Whoever began a new chapter at Ephesians 6 was high on something).

C. Its tense system is different from English

1. Time is less important than “manner” or “aspect”

2. The aorist is a “zero” tense; there is no “once-for-all” tense in Greek

D. Its lexical stock is profoundly influenced by the LXX

More important than any lexicon or dictionary for understanding the NT vocabulary is a concordance of the LXX. If you want to understand the use of “grace”/ ἡ χάρις in the NT, check the usage of ἡ χάρις in the LXX. It is used 82 times in the LXX, only 12 times in reference to God. Further, in the ETs, they translate it as “favor” in the OT, and as “grace” in the NT. The word itself means “favor,” which is a perfectly ordinary English word. Similarly, ἐκκλησία simply

means “assembly” everywhere in the OT, and should be translated that way in English, rather than as “church,” for which we have no secular word in English.

E. It has its own idioms

F. It employs some parts of speech differently than English. The definite article, for instance, is employed differently, and the failure to recognize this confuses the Jehovah’s Witnesses. My website has a little essay, “God or god at John 1,” in which I demonstrate that θεὸς, in its various cases, appears in the NT 255 times. I actually cite every one of them. Apart from the reference to “an unknown god” at Acts 17:23 and at John 1:1, the Jehovah’s Witness translation always translates it as “God.” So, on 253 of the 255 appearances, they themselves translate θεὸς as “God,” and they only refuse to do so here because it upsets their theology.