

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE II.

WHY DID ST. PAUL WRITE GREEK?

BY LEWIS M. MILLER, LANSING, MICHIGAN.

ST. PAUL was born of Hebrew parents. As a boy, in his father's home, he doubtless spoke Hebrew — probably in the vernacular form that was then in common use. As a youth, at the feet of Gamaliel, he was thoroughly trained in the treasures of Hebrew lore and literature. How true and loyal a Hebrew he became under these parental and educational influences, we can best understand from his own words. He calls himself "a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee." In his address to Agrippa he declares: "[The Jews] knew me from the beginning, (if they would testify) that after the most straitest sect of our religion, I lived a Pharisee." And again he describes himself as "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee." Surely, no son of Abraham could make a better showing.

The Hebrew of the Old Testament, in which St. Paul had been so thoroughly trained, is a very unique language. But the more one studies it, the more he becomes convinced that its very peculiarities had much to do with its excellent adaptation to the great part which it was appointed to play in the sublime drama of human redemption. It was God's own language. "It was constructed and perfected," says one writer, "for the transmission of those lofty divine ideas that are eventually to lift the whole race from the darkness of sin into the light and life of holiness. . . . It is a language in which

the spirit of God spake, and to which the breath of the Almighty gave life." Yes; it may be truly said that God breathed into that language "the breath of life" and it "became a living soul." Combining, as it does, the animation and vivacity of the Oriental tongues with the dignity and gravity of the Occidental, it forms also a connecting link between the East and the West.

Remarkable simplicity and directness characterize the Hebrew style of composition, giving it a wondrous power of touching the human heart. Carlyle felt this when he wrote: "The oldest Hebrew prophet, under a vesture the most diverse from ours, does yet, because he speaks from the heart of man, speak to all men's hearts." And so it is — the Hebrew, which is the language of the heart, plays with the varied passions and emotions of the human breast — hope and fear, love and hate, joy and sorrow, vengeance and mercy — as skillfully as the harper plays with the many chords of his instrument. Addison has remarked that "the Hebrew idioms run into the English tongue with a peculiar grace and beauty." This lends to our excellent version of the Scriptures much of that mysterious power of touching the heart which characterizes the Hebrew original. But this characteristic of the Hebrew scriptures has never been more beautifully and eloquently depicted than in the following paragraph written by Dr. Joseph Parker:—

"Would you cull and gather into floral groups sweet words, tender expressions, gracious solaces, syllables that find their way into the heart's night and bitterness? For this you must go to the Old Testament. The Hebrew tongue was made for comfort, for a great redundancy of solace; there is wine in the grape of every syllable; he who presses most in the agony of his need will drink most abundantly and most refreshingly of the wine of God's love."

These are not the words of a mere sentimental enthusiast, but the reflections of an earnest student and thinker.

Then why did St. Paul, when he entered upon his great life work, abandon his own mother tongue and resort to an alien form of speech? Why did St. Paul write Greek? Surely there must have been some overpowering reasons. Such reasons there were, indeed — reasons fully as potent as those which impelled him to become an apostle to the Gentiles. For the hand of God is just as apparent in the one case as in the other, the only difference being that, in the first case, the reasons came to him, on that memorable journey to Damascus, with the swiftness of the thunderbolt, and in the other case the reasons were slowly hammered out and forged upon the anvil of God's long and careful preparation for the promulgation of the gospel. And St. Paul yielded to both; for, whether swift or whether slow, God's reasons are equally irresistible.

In Conybeare and Howson's "Life and Epistles of St. Paul" we find this significant paragraph:—

"It was not an accident that the New Testament was written in Greek, the language which can best express the highest thoughts and worthiest feelings of the intellect and heart, and which is adapted to be the instrument of education for all nations; nor was it an accident that the composition of these books and the promulgation of the gospel were delayed till the instruction of our Lord and the writings of his apostles could be expressed in the dialect of Alexandria."

What, then, is this wonderful "dialect of Alexandria"—this Hellenistic Greek so-called—this New Testament Greek—which St. Paul was constrained to use and which subserved his purpose so much better than his own noble mother tongue could have done? The story of its origin and development is a very interesting one—in fact, it forms one of the most

fascinating episodes of human history. But we can glance at it only briefly.

St. Paul asks: "What advantage then hath the Jew?" and answers: "Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the Oracles of God." For ages those oracles, so committed to the chosen people, had been written and preserved in the Hebrew language, and had been jealously guarded by the Jews as their exclusive birthright. But the time was fast approaching, in God's wider economy, when the Jew was to lose that distinctive advantage, and the oracles of God were to become the common property of all mankind—Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian, bond and free, alike. The gospel was to be proclaimed in the uttermost parts of the earth.

But the Hebrew language, though unsurpassed within its own peculiar sphere, had its limitations, and very serious ones in view of the great work now to be accomplished. For the simple narration of past events in history—for the record of future events in prophecy—for the noting of concise and pithy apothegms of wisdom—for sustaining the most sublime flights of imagination in poetry—the Hebrew language had proved sufficient. How well it played its part, the Old Testament is its most faithful witness. But it could carry the heavy burden of man's redemption no farther. It was as if God had said to that language: "Hitherto shalt thou come; but no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed."

The Hebrew vocabulary, while it richly abounds in concrete terms, such as designate things that can be seen, felt, heard, and easily understood, is very scant in those abstract terms which deal with ideas, conceptions, and things outside of the actual domain of the senses—such terms, in fact, as are needed by the logician in his reasoning and the philosopher

in his disquisitions. It is also lacking in that rich variety of conjunctions, connectives, and particles of various and delicate shades of meaning, which serve to bind clauses together with the nicest distinctions. So, as can readily be seen, the Hebrew language was poorly equipped to grapple successfully with the deepest problems of philosophy and to express them with delicacy and precision. It would assuredly fail the writer who had occasion to express his thought with nicety, "piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow."

There is not in the entire Old Testament a single instance of abstract reasoning. It is true, in the so-called Wisdom books, there are many wise sayings, sage remarks, and valuable reflections, but they are rather conclusions drawn from personal observation and actual experiences, than logical deductions from premises. As has been remarked, they are just such conclusions as an observing man would draw, while sitting at the city gates, or in the market places or elsewhere where people congregate.

But now, when the gospel must encounter the keen and subtle logic of the Greek, the stubborn, self-sufficient egotism of the Roman, the stolid indifference of the heathen, and the deep-seated prejudices of the Jew, there was need of a finer and more highly tempered weapon of offense and defense than the simple Hebrew. And this could then be found only in the Greek language, which was, as Bunsen says, "the language of art, poetry, history, and, above all, of philosophy."

What can I say of the Greek language that has not been better said before? Doubtless the world will never cease to sing its praises, and doubtless it never should. For the world owes more to the Greek language than to any other ever spoken by man. In that language were given to us the greatest

epic poem of the world, the most elegant models of prose, of dramatic composition and of oratory, and, finally, the New Testament — the most vitally important book of all times.

In the histories of Xenophon and Thucydides, the orations of Lysias, Isocrates, Æschines, and Demosthenes, the philosophical treatises of Plato, the comedies of Aristophanes, and the tragedies of Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the Greek language was developed and molded into the most perfect medium for the expression of thought that the world has ever known; and doubtless no mere human tongue will ever surpass it in that respect. But it was not the polished and classic diction of Xenophon, Thucydides, Plato, and Demosthenes that was to have the honor of bearing the Glad Tidings to the gentiles. Splendid and perfect as that language was, it was not yet ready for its glorious mission. As the Apostles, gathered on the day of Pentecost, had to receive the baptism of fire before they were fitted to go forth upon their world-conquering mission, so the Greek language had to undergo a special preparation for its destined work. And who shall say that the baptism of this beautiful language into the service of God was not just as truly the work of the Holy Spirit as the fiery baptism of the Apostles?

The classic Greek of literature, doubtless, was never the language of the common people, any more than the elegant diction of Macaulay, Ruskin, Irving, and Emerson is the language of the common people of England and America to-day. It had to be made a little more democratic. So, in the providence of God, out of the pure Attic Greek sprang a common dialect, which steadily followed trade and commerce, until it spread over the civilized world.

Next came the Macedonian conquest of Greece and the reduction of that country under the dominion of a single ruler.

producing a still greater change in the speech in general use. This Macedo-Alexandrian dialect, so-called, was carried by Alexander, with his conquering hosts from Macedonia, through Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine, down into Egypt. There he founded the city of Alexandria, which afterward became the seat of Greek learning and culture. But Alexander himself, sighing for more worlds to conquer, died at an early age, little dreaming that his greatest achievement was not the conquest of the world, but the making of a world language, through which countless generations yet unborn should be blessed.

But the Greek language was not yet ready. A still more wonderful change had to be wrought. The elegant style impressed upon it by the great masters of prose and poetry, like the beautiful work of art that it was—

"chaste as the icicle
That's curded by the frost from purest snow
And hangs on Dian's temple"—

appealed, nevertheless, too much to the head and not enough to the heart. Some of the tender heart-melodies of the old Hebrew bards and prophets had to be breathed into the soul of that chosen language before it was ready for its appointed work. For, with all its grace, and beauty, and expressiveness, Greek was but a heathen tongue. It knew, as yet, naught of the great religious doctrines to be proclaimed, and "could not frame to pronounce them right." New meanings and shades of meanings had to be impressed upon its musical words to adapt them to the expression of religious thought. This was accomplished through its intimate contact with the Hebrew.

After the Macedonian conquests the Jews of the dispersion came into close association and intercourse with the Greeks

in trade and commerce. They thus learned the later Greek, the spoken language of common life, rather than the literary tongue. But, being foreigners, and speaking Greek as such, they naturally gave it more or less of a Hebrew coloring. This intimacy of the Hebrews and the Greeks, while it prevailed throughout the commercial world, was most pronounced in Alexandria, where Alexander had given the Jews especial privileges. As Alexandria was then the center of religious thought and philosophy, doubtless the intercourse of the two races there partook less of a mere commercial cast than in the outside world.

Although this Hellenistic Greek had its origin and early development in the exigencies of common life, it could not fail, with two peoples so active and intellectual as the Jews and Greeks, to make its appearance in literature. Its earliest literary monument is the Septuagint, or Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures. The story runs that Ptolemy Philadelphus, ruler of Egypt about three hundred years before Christ, had established a great library in Alexandria and was ambitious to make it the greatest in the world. He sought everywhere for books to enrich it. So he is said to have caused the translation to be made by seventy learned men; and hence it has ever been known as the Septuagint. Whether the story be truth or fable, or whether the translation really originated from a natural demand for a version of the Scriptures in the then current world language, as some maintain, the fact is nevertheless fixed, that through that version, aided by the apocryphal books so closely allied with it, the Greek language was given the peculiar tone and coloring necessary for the expression of religious thought; and when the New Testament writers were ready for their work, they found a language ready for their use.

Although this New Testament Greek differs materially from the classic type of the language and has a very decided Hebraic cast, so that some knowledge of Hebrew is necessary to its full understanding, yet it is by no means a barbarous or semi-barbarous dialect, or a mere jumble of Greek and Hebrew. It is a language in and of itself, of distinctively divine origin and sanction. Dr. Christopher Wordsworth (Bishop of Lincoln) closes the preface to his "Commentary on the New Testament" with this characterization of New Testament Greek:—

"The Greek of the New Testament is not the Greek of Xenophon, Plato, or Demosthenes. It is a language of its own. And we need not scruple to affirm that, in precision of expression, in pure and native simplicity, in delicacy of handling, in the grouping of words and phrases, in dignified and majestic sublimity, it has no rival in the world."

So eminent a Greek scholar as Professor Buttmann says of the "Acts of the Apostles": "The diction and entire mode of expression is often suggestive of Attic elegance and is full of genuine Greek turns and constructions."

Such, then, is that "dialect of Alexandria"—that Hellenistic or New Testament Greek, as it is variously termed, which possesses so much beauty of expression, richness of thought, and depth of meaning that Mahaffy calls it "the splendid blossom of Syrian Greek prose," and which St. Paul found so much more serviceable than his own mother tongue. It is true, it lacks many of the graces and elegances of the classic type of the language, and the mere classical scholar is wont to lament their absence. But it has carefully retained those characteristics of Greek composition which make for strength and expressiveness. While its syntax is simpler, it still exhibits that freedom of arrangement of the constituent elements of the sentence, which enable the writer to present his ideas in

the most emphatic and impressive manner. The written sentence vies with the spoken one in expressiveness and force, and paragraphs become veritable word-pictures of thought. The essential distinctions of the Greek tense-system, which are often difficult to render elegantly into English, but which must be observed if one would understand the Greek Testament aright, have also been retained in this "dialect of Alexandria" and contribute no little to the beauty of the narrative portions. In this laying aside of mere ornaments but retaining the useful expedients of precision, force, and expression. New Testament Greek has been likened to the ancient wrestler or runner, who divested himself of all unnecessary habiliments and impediments, that he might the better commit himself to the task before him. New Testament Greek had a great and glorious work to perform. Its mission was to drive home to the minds of the heathen races the teachings that should transform and uplift mankind, and not so much to titillate the ear with mere poetic graces.

The reasons which impelled St. Paul to resort to Greek as the proper medium for the proclamation of the gospel to the gentiles may be summed up as follows:—

1. Because the Hebrew tongue was not adapted to a logical exposition of the doctrines of the new dispensation. It would certainly have broken down under the strain of St. Paul's impetuosity and dialectics. With all his Hebrew training, it is doubtful whether he could have successfully written his immortal epistles in his mother tongue.

2. Because Greek was, at that period, the common language of the world, probably even more so than English is to-day. It was, as Mahaffy has said, "a practical organ of communication," and, as Cicero said in his defense of Archias,

was "read by almost the whole world." By its use St. Paul could reach the greatest number.

3. Because St. Paul was a master of the Greek language as then spoken throughout the world. Although his training had been in the language and lore of his fathers, he had learned Greek as a boy in the Greek city of Tarsus, a famous emporium where traders met, and bought and sold. He had used Greek with his boyhood playmates and in his intercourse with men of the world. It was another mother tongue.

4. Because Greek was, above all, the divinely appointed medium for the promulgation of the truths of the new dispensation, and no other tongue would avail. This is the one reason which overshadowed all others. And when St. Paul exclaimed: "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel," he might have added: "and in the language divinely prepared for my use."