

What hath Jerusalem to do with Athens - Again?

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Regarding motivation, classical language teachers at Christian colleges have an embarrassment of riches. We have over one hundred students every year dying to start Greek, probably all of them wanting to read the New Testament. They are already committed to God's word and we don't really have to seduce them into our introductory classes. But once there, a disappointing side effect emerges. They are not really interested in Greek as a language or in Greek Literature.

They see Greek not as a goal, but as a tool, a means to an end. While the end may be noble, I do feel it is my duty to cure students of the assumption that the Greek language is a nuisance and an obstacle in a search for truth. Lest you think I'm over sensitive, let me quote from our beginning Greek grammar book. "If you memorized the whole paradigm you would be learning hundreds of forms that never occur in the NT. So why learn them?" Not only is this author clearly not a big believer in generative grammar, but the subtext here implies something like this: "The only Greek worth knowing is in the New Testament."

I have practical as well as philosophical motivations for opposing this mentality. Students will never go on to read Plato, Euripides, Herodotus and Homer, or even texts more directly relevant to NT studies, like the Apocrypha, other intertestamental literature and the Church Fathers, if the only Greek worth knowing is in the New Testament. A student may well ask, "Why should these texts be relevant to NT Greek?"

In the Foreign Language Department at Wheaton College we have sections for Modern Languages and also Ancient Languages, known colloquially as the Dead Languages. Although we are in some ways a step-daughter, we have our own Dead Language Society and are happy. The

modern people do up to date pedagogy. They abhor grammar and translation drill. While we dead language types have only recently graduated from chalk to the scented marker, they use many media. They have TVs and cable connections to various foreign broadcasts. They use CDs in class and now DVDs. (Homer, as far as we know, never burned a CD). They subscribe to foreign newspapers. They require overseas immersion programs for their majors. In short they have a wealth of avenues for exposing themselves to and even living in the culture which sustains their language in its various forms.

By contrast, we dead language types have no culture (well, no surviving culture), no ancient newspapers, a few lyrics, but no music, just a few plays, some verbose philosophers and also theologians and some delightful story-tellers. But we have very little to make these peoples' world come alive, nothing to make the convictions of their world view convincing to us. The only form of our dead languages which survives is written and we can't even argue intelligently about the correct pronunciation of anything. While this freedom may attract the articulatorily challenged student, what it really means is that these are not dead languages, they are extinct. Even if we could resurrect the language corpse, its world has moved on. The environment will no longer sustain them. The world is different now.

Modern language teachers share amusing anecdotes about student's word substitution errors. In dead languages, wedded as we often are to one-way translation, we easily fall victim to a word-for-word substitution method which works well enough that many never question the philosophy. Dead languages are reduced to an arcane algebra in which the lexicon supplies potential solutions for variables in an equation which, when solved, leads inevitably to some meaningful result. As if all we need to do is substitute new words for old—ours for theirs.

To counter this, I try to communicate to students that words in dictionaries are like specimens in a museum drawer, which is fine for taxonomists, but that as language learners and users we must be more like animal behaviorists or field biologists. We want to observe what words do in various situations, not stuffed in a drawer. What is the word's range of meanings? How does its meaning change over time? How does it react to a changing environment (a different context)? Can you use it in this situation?

Nothing communicates the importance of these questions to students like the experience of seeing the meaning of a text shift after the

cultural context of a word in one text is revealed by seeing the same word in another context. Over the years I have come to rely heavily on this method - creating lexicographical tension by juxtaposing vocabulary and texts (usually a “pagan” one and a “sacred one). I also try to highlight the dangers of our own failure to recognize how profoundly different ancient authors are from us, and ultimately how potentially different our meaning is from theirs. A few examples will illustrate how such light dawns.

The author of the book of Acts and the author of the *Odyssey* might seem to have little in common, but this is misleading. Luke outlines succinctly how his book will unfold, “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the *farthest* part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Place this text side by side with the opening lines of Homer’s *Odyssey* (1.23) which explain that the return of Odysseus is uneventful early on because Poseidon, who rages against him unceasingly, is away receiving sacrifices among Ethiopians, the *farthermost* of men. As his audience already recognized in Luke’s echo of Homer’s words,¹ it also suddenly dawns on us that the story of the Ethiopian eunuch marks the point where the Gospel goes to the farthest part the earth.

When students discover that our Advanced Koiné Readings class focuses on non-canonical texts rather than biblical ones, I often meet with initial resistance. After a steady diet of Gospels and Paul for three semesters, it makes good pedagogical sense to read unfamiliar texts, but even more important, this non-canonical literature is the literary backdrop familiar to all NT writers. Shouldn’t all NT readers also be familiar with it?

The book of Tobit shows repeatedly how important the cultural and religious context of the Diaspora is for reading the New Testament. Tobit is the patriarch of a pious Jewish family. The father, sends his son, Tobias, on a journey to recover the family’s investments. Tobias and his travelling companion, Brother Azariah, meet Tobias’ distant cousin in Ecbatana. Sarah is an only daughter, whom Tobias is next in line to marry. Coincidentally, he will also inherit her family’s considerable fortune. Regrettably, Sarah has been married seven times, and each time the groom has died in the bridal chamber before consummating the union. Azariah explains that the demon Asmodeus is in love with Sarah and will not harm her but kills any who approach her.

Shift now to Matthew 22, where the Sadducees approach Jesus with a question about a woman who had seven husbands. This is no longer a hypothetical trap concocted by crafty lawyers, but a question that might

occur to any thoughtful reader of sacred literature in a story familiar to all of Jesus contemporaries. But there is more.

Before his trip, Tobias' father gives a farewell speech. "Honor your mother because she faced many dangers for you while you were still in the womb." The phrase "dangers in the womb" opens a window on the not-so-ancient fears and dangers accompanying childbirth. Magic texts and protective amulets from the period elaborate the many evils with which Lilith and the Devil afflicted pregnant or nursing women. If we now turn to Rev 12 where the dragon lurks to devour the child of the woman we see that John has couched the hostilities between the Redeemer child and Evil in the metaphor (familiar to his audience) of the very real dangers. To those in the ancient world, redemption was as much at risk at the nativity as at the cross.

At the end of the story, when Tobias returns home, he discovers that his travelling companion, Brother Azariah, has actually been an angel. The angel chides Tobias for not noticing that he never ate any food. Apparently it was common knowledge in the ancient world that angels do not eat food (the way everyone today knows that vampires don't reflect in mirrors). Armed with this knowledge about angelic habits, the simple request of the risen Christ in Luke 24:41 "Do you have any thing to eat?" becomes a powerful anti-gnostic polemic. Luke's clear message to his contemporaries is: You cannot believe, as some early Christians want to, that Jesus is merely some kind of angel.

Who can debate the value and necessity of this background for the New Testament? The Gospel can neither exist nor be understood in a cultural vacuum. Literature needs other literature to make sense. God has couched his word in literature. One must not read the Bible in a literary void. Such connections in the world of Koiné might be expected, but even the classics make their own contribution.

The Biblical authors are not twenty-first century thinkers, nor do they have a sixteenth century reformation or scholastic outlook. They are full-fledged members of the ancient world, a world whose context is only minimally explained within the Bible itself. Yes, Jerusalem needs Athens, if only to make clear what Jerusalem means.

I do not suggest that our readings of the foreign literature we call the Bible are often wrong. I do want to warn that there is a peril inherent in our assumed familiarity with it. We run the risk, especially in extinct languages and cultures, of reading out of context. With the native speakers all

gone, no one will correct us when our culture or world view imposes itself on their text. This is an admonition worth hearing, that the study and teaching of all literature and the liberal arts generally instructs us with regard to our limits and place, and enhances our reading of God's word.

Yet there is more. At heart, the engagement of foreign literature is an act which affirms diversity. What could be more different from us today than the ancient world and its people? And yet, that which we hold in common with those of antiquity, human sinfulness and the potential to become children of God, demonstrates that these differences are no impediment to God. The bland sameness of culture or time and space cannot be criteria for divine adoption.

The very foreignness of Scripture makes a simple, yet profound and necessary claim on us. Not all of God's children have been like us, nor will they be. This message emerges from the very words on the pages as we view them in their culture and time. Our prayer must be that our study, even when we are not studying the Bible, will be an act of worship which opens our hearts and minds to the historic diversity of God's people, that our devotion to learning and language will help us envision a kingdom where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but instead a whole community drawn from of every nation, kindred, tongue and people.

NOTES

¹ For the familiarity of Homer in first century Palestine, see Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*. New Haven: Yale, 2000. 1-14, esp. 4-5.