

Language and Idioms:
Dealing with obscure sayings in the Gospels



The New Testament World - Week 6
Adult Education

Significance of Idioms

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One problem with translating one language into another is how to deal with idioms. If you translate idiomatic expressions literally there is a chance they will be misunderstood. We understand the common phrase, "It's raining cats and dogs," but put that literally into another language and it probably won't make much sense.

To illustrate, let's look at a few Spanish phrases. "Echar flores" would be literally translated "to throw flowers" and if the context didn't help, you might not know it's similar to our idiom, "to butter someone up". Or what about, "Quemarse las pestañas", which translates, "to burn your eyelashes", but is like our idiom, "to burn the midnight oil". And one more is the phrase "Dejar a uno en la calle" which translates, "to leave someone in the street" but is comparable to our idiom, "to take somebody to the cleaners".

In the case of the words that Jesus spoke we are dealing with a double translation, from Hebrew or Aramaic to Greek and Greek to English. Are there cases where Jesus was using an idiom and the meaning has been lost? Yes, in fact there are. The following is taken from [*Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*](#):

Many Gospel expressions are not just poor Greek, but actually meaningless in Greek. One brief example will suffice to illustrate this fact. The text of Matthew 6:22-23 literally reads: "The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is good, your whole body is full of light; but if your eye is bad your whole body is full of darkness..."

"If your eye is good" is an idiomatic way of saying in Hebrew, "if you are generous." But our English translators have not recognized this Hebrew idiom. Almost all translations preserve the singular, "eye," even though "eyes" would make more sense in English. Is it necessary for only one of the eyes to be good? Which one, the right or the left? Only three translations (Good News For Modern Man, New English Bible, New International Version) have felt the absurdity of "eye." These translations have translated "eyes" in spite of the fact that the original Greek text has "eye."

More variety exists in the translation of the word "good." Weymouth and the New International Version translate literally. But obviously, "good" in relation to an eye means nothing in particular. (Weymouth tries to solve this problem by translating eye as "eyesight" - "If your eyesight is good"!) Other translators simply guess at the meaning of "good." "Single" is the traditional translation of "good" (King James, American Standard). Most modern versions prefer "sound" (Amplified, Goodspeed, Jerusalem Bible, New Berkeley, New English Bible, Phillips, Revised Standard, Williams). Other suggestions are "clear" (Good News For Modern Man, New American Standard), and "pure" (The Living Bible). Only James Moffatt translates "good eye" as "generous," but even he uses "sound" in the Lukan parallel to Matthew 6:22 (The same Greek word for "good" appears in both places.) Apparently, by the time Moffatt reached Luke 11:34 he was already beginning to have some doubts about his translation of Matthew 6:22.

[Understanding The Difficult Words Of Jesus](#) is an excellent way to get started learning about the Jewish heritage of the Christian faith. The book presents a strong argument that Jesus spoke Hebrew and goes on to demonstrate how powerful a tool that knowledge can be by explaining a number of difficult-to-understand sayings of Jesus.

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HEBRAIC IDIOMS IN MATTHEW

Introduction

It is common knowledge that the earliest manuscripts currently existing of the Synoptic Gospels are in Greek. However, scholarship in the last century has built a very strong case for the Hebraic foundation and beginnings of the Gospels. This is most easily evident by the strong usage of Hebraic idioms. As David Bivin states, “Hebraisms are as ubiquitous in the Synoptic Gospels as cats in Jerusalem”¹. Simply put, idioms mean something different from the literal meaning of the actual words². It makes sense that the colloquial nature of a text reflects its origins. Bivin confidently asserts that the Synoptic Gospels and the story of Jesus are based on Hebrew Documents. Therefore, it is the English translator’s task to put the Greek back into Hebrew, understand the idiom and then translate the Hebrew, rather than the Greek, to English³.

The tradition that Matthew originated from Hebrew is first seen in the testimony of Papias, a bishop in Hierapolis in Asia Minor during the mid-second century CE. Papias says, “Matthew recorded in the Hebrew language the words of the Lord, and each person translated them as best he could”⁴.

Robert Lindsey, a forerunner in this field of research, first came upon the Hebraic origins of the Synoptic Gospels when translating Mark from Greek into Hebrew in 1959. During his collaboration with David Flusser they began to understand the development

¹ Bivin, David. (2004) *Hendiadys in the Synoptic Gospels*. Retrieved from: <http://jersalemperspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1616>

² Bivin, David. (2004) *Hebrew Idioms in the Gospels*. Retrieved from: <http://www.jersalemperspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1551>

³ Bivin, David. (2004) *Hebrew Idioms in the Gospels*. Retrieved from: <http://www.jersalemperspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1551>

⁴ Papias’ work is not in existence, but he is quoted by Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History III 39, 16.

of the Synoptic Gospels. They theorized that, out of Mark, came Luke and Matthew, most of which originated in Hebrew⁵. Flusser also pointed out that rabbinic parables were always told in Hebrew. Lindsey believed that the Synoptic Gospels were actually written in a form of Hebrew that developed out of Biblical Hebrew – what is now called “Mishnaic Hebrew”. He states:

The presence of post-biblical Hebraisms embedded in the Greek of the gospels also rails against explaining the Hebraic Greek of the synoptic tradition as being an imitation of the Septuagint’s Greek. If the writers of Matthew, Mark and Luke were imitating the Greek of the Septuagint, which reflects Hebrew idioms originating in the biblical Hebrew, how could they produce Greek reflecting idioms found only in post-biblical Hebrew?⁶

As David Bivin reminds us, Hebraic idioms are rampant in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus’ teachings in Matthew are particularly full of idioms. For the short scope of this paper we will look at three in particular: abolishing and fulfilling the law found in Matthew 5:17; the eye is the light to the body found in Matthew 6:22; and binding and loosing found in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18.

Abolish and Fulfill – Matthew 5:17

Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount are some of the most quoted in sermons throughout churches worldwide, yet they are also full of statements that are often misunderstood. In English we often quote Matthew 5:17 as saying “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (NASB). By looking at the setting we are offered some initial clues about interpreting this verse. The beginning of Matthew 5 tells us that Jesus saw the crowds, went up on

⁵ Lindsey, Robert. (1993) *Jesus: Rabbi & Lord*, chapters 7 and 8.

⁶ Lindsey, Robert. (2004) *Four Keys for Better Understanding Jesus*. Retrieved from: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1680>

a mountain and his disciples followed him. Then he began to teach the disciples. Perhaps Jesus was not delivering an elaborate sermon to the masses as we have come to assume in this passage. He sat down and taught his disciples like the other rabbis of his day did. When put into his historic and cultural setting, we can evaluate more correctly the idiomatic or colloquial language that he would use to teach.

The concept of abolishing and fulfilling was a common idiom during and after Jesus' day. Exodus Rabbah 6:1 says, "No letter will ever be abolished from the Law"⁷. Jesus teaches the same concept in Matthew, only he acknowledges that nothing will be disappear until after He has accomplished what was prophesied. In Hebrew, our key words would be *lekayem* (to fulfill, preserve or sustain) and *levatel* (to cancel or nullify)⁸. These words are often found in later rabbinic debates. When a sage felt that a colleague was misinterpreting or incorrectly teaching a passage, he was accused of canceling, destroying or abolishing the Torah. The accuser was the one who was fulfilling the Torah by teaching it correctly.

In his New Testament commentary, John Lightfoot explains three important contextual aspects of this verse. First, it was believed that the Messiah would "advance the Mosaic Law to the very highest pitch"⁹ and would fulfill the prophets. Second, this verse served as a polemic against the scribes and Pharisees because he preached against their traditions of the Torah which they enforced upon the people¹⁰. Third, Jesus brings an observance of the Torah which is more pure and excellent than that of

⁷ Bivin and Blizzard. (1984) *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, p.153.

⁸ Bivin, David. (2004) *Matthew 5:17: "Destroy" the Law*. Retrieved from: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1866>

⁹ Lightfoot, John. (1979) *Commentary on the New Testament from Hebraica and Talmud, Volume 2*, p. 99.

¹⁰ Lightfoot, John. (1979) *Commentary on the New Testament from Hebraica and Talmud, Volume 2*, p. 100.

the Pharisees and explains the Torah according to its genuine and spiritual intent,¹¹ and thus “fulfilling” it.

David Bivin has offered three progressive translations of Matthew 5:17 that are worth comparing to the English translations we normally use¹².

1. *Literal Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction*: "Do not think that I have come to cancel the Torah [the five books of Moses] and the Prophets [the second section of the Hebrew canon]. I have not come to cancel but to sustain."
2. *Plain English Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction*: "Do not think that I have come to weaken the Torah and the Prophets. I have not come to weaken them but to strengthen them."
3. *Dynamic Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction*: "Do not suppose that I have any intention of undermining Scripture by misinterpreting it. My purpose is to establish and maintain the knowledge and observance of God's Word not undermine it."

There are many scholars and commentators that would somehow pull the “Law of Christ” away from the Torah of God as if what Jesus taught was radically different than the Law. It has been said that Matthew is affirming the Law of Jesus and not the Law of Moses¹³ as if the two were mutual exclusive. However, by putting Jesus’ vernacular back into his context, we find that he was actually stating that his teaching and interpretation of the Torah were superior – not that he was teaching a new Torah.

By not understanding the context and the intended meaning of a text, we open ourselves up for incorrect interpretations and applications of Jesus’ words. In fact, within the Christian world, there is often confusion between “abolish” and “fulfill”. A

¹¹ Lightfoot, John. (1979) *Commentary on the New Testament from Hebraica and Talmud, Volume 2, p. 100.*

¹² Bivin, David. (2004) *Matthew 5:17: “Destroy” the Law.* Retrieved from: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1866>

¹³ Sandmel, Samuel. (1956) *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament.* p. 149.

distinguishing is made when the verse is quoted, but often the end result for the believer is the same – the Torah is done away with.

The Eye is the Lamp to the Body – Matthew 6:22-23

In the next chapter of Matthew we see a rather ambiguous verse that seems out of place in English. In the first 21 verses of chapter six, Jesus is telling his listeners to not be like the hypocrites, or the religious actors, by giving, praying and fasting for everyone to see. Instead, seek things of eternal reward. Then in verses 22 and 23, Jesus says, “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness” (NASB). This parallels Luke 11:34 which says, “Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness” (NASB).

Lightfoot explains the Matthew passage as a metaphor for generosity and covetousness, calling it a “usual manner of speech of the nation”¹⁴. He equates a good eye with generosity and an evil eye with stinginess, quoting Tractate Trumot of the Talmud:

This is the measure of Truma (offering given to the priests). A good eye yields one out of forty: that is the fortieth part. The school of Shammai says, one out of thirty. A middle eye, one out of fifty. And an evil eye, one out of sixty. He that gives a gift, let him give with a good eye: and he that dedicates anything, let him dedicate it with a good eye¹⁵.

¹⁴ Lightfoot, John. (1979) *Commentary on the New Testament from Hebraica and Talmud, Volume 2, p. 156.*

¹⁵ Lightfoot, John. (1979) *Commentary on the New Testament from Hebraica and Talmud, Volume 2, p. 156-157.*

Geza Vermes, in his book The Religion of Jesus the Jew, further explains this in relation to other Jewish writings of the times. Vermes finds parallel between the Gospel writings of the eye and the lamp and the sayings of Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who equated the “good eye” with the “good way” (mAb. 2:9) – in other words, proper religious behavior. Additionally, Vermes ties in the dualism of light and dark found in the Qumran writings to the Gospel writings. If the eye is good, it fills the body with light, otherwise darkness would be victorious – the fear of such dualism. In 4Q186 (“Horoscopes”), it is taught that people consist of a nine-part mixture of light and darkness. The Teacher of Righteousness, focusing on the individual, implies that a good eye is a divine gift as is the light that it brings¹⁶.

These two verses under examination actually do fit in with the text. Jesus is talking about actions and their perceptions and benefits within the community. He warns the disciples not to give, fast or pray as a show, but to be genuine and generous to the community and, in doing so, bring light and all that it represents. However, because of the idiomatic nature of the phrase, these verses are often misunderstood or avoided all together.

Binding and Loosing – Matthew 16:19, 18:18

In Matthew we find two instances of the same idiom – binding and loosing. In Matthew 16, Jesus has been tested by the Pharisees who he warns the disciples about followed by Peter’s confession of the Messiah. At this point, Jesus declares that he is establishing his Church and not even Hades can overpower it and that Peter has the authority to bind and loose. In chapter 18, Jesus explains to his disciples how to deal

¹⁶ Vermes, Geza. (1973) *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, p. 82.

with an unrepentant brother – what has come to be known as “church discipline”. If the brother does not respond responsibly to confrontation, he is to be removed from fellowship. At this point Jesus repeats his previous statement that what is bound on earth will be bound in heaven and loosing, likewise. Both of these passages serve as practical instruction for the authority given to the leaders of the new community of believers.

As John Lightfoot plainly states, to bind is to forbid and to loose is to allow – common vernacular in Jesus’ day. He sarcastically says, “To think that Christ, when he used the common phrase, was not understood by his hearers in the common and vulgar sense, shall I call it a matter of laughter or of madness?”¹⁷

Working from our earlier assumption that Matthew originated in Hebrew, we can take key terms in their Hebrew equivalents. “Bind” in Hebrew is *asar* and “loose” is *hitir*. In the *Tenakh*, *asar* can mean tie (Judges 15:12), imprison (2 Kings 17:4), hitch (Genesis 46:29) and tether (Genesis 49:11); *hitir* can mean the opposite of each of those¹⁸. By Jesus’ lifetime *asar* and *hitir* were commonly used idiomatically. We see prolific examples of this throughout early rabbinic writings. Here are a few examples:

During the war of Quietus, they *bound* the garlands of brides and that no one should teach his son Greek. During the last war [the Bar-Kochba Revolt] they *bound* the bride's riding about the village in a litter. (*m. Sotah* 9:14)¹⁹

If a person made a vow to abstain from milk, he *is loosed* to eat whey. Rabbi Yose *binds* it.... If a person made a vow to abstain from meat, he *is loosed* to eat broth.... Rabbi Yehudah *binds* it.... If a person made a vow to

¹⁷ Lightfoot, John. (1979) *Commentary on the New Testament from Hebraica and Talmud, Volume 2*, p. 240.

¹⁸ Bivin, David. (2004) “Binding” and “Loosing”. Retrieved from: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1561>

¹⁹ Bivin, David. (2004) “Binding” and “Loosing”. Retrieved from: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1561>

abstain from wine, he *is loosed* to eat a cooked dish which has the taste of wine. (*m. Nedarim* 6:5-7)¹⁹

If a person sold produce in Syria and said, "It is from the Land of Israel," tithes must be paid on it. If he said, "It is already tithed," he may be believed, since the mouth that *bound* is the mouth that *loosed*. (*m. Demai* 6:11)¹⁹

R. Yohanan said, "Why have you brought this elder to me? Whatever I *loose*, he *binds*; whatever I *bind*, he *looses*. (Hieros. Jon. Tobbh, fol. 60.1)²⁰

This man *binds*, but the other *looses*. (Bab. Megillah, fol. 26.7)²⁰

Although of the disciples of Shammai, and those of Hillel, the one *bound* and the other *loosed*. (Tosephta in Jevam. Cap. I)²⁰

R. Meir *loosed* the mixing of wine and oil to anoint a sick man on the Sabbath. (Heiros. Schabb., fol. 3.1)²¹

In chapter 16 of Matthew Jesus appears to be speaking directly to Peter in the presence of the disciples. He tells Peter that he is being given the keys to the kingdom of heaven – the symbol of authority²². According to Dan Juster, "the keys of the Kingdom had a specific meaning within Judaism at the time, as reflected in the Talmud. The keys were understood to be the delegated authority for judicial decisions in Israel, the covenant nation"²³. In chapter 18 of Matthew, Jesus is talking to the group of disciples and tells them that they have the same authority to bind and to loose. Within this time period in Israel, the Sanhedrin had religious authority. Within these chapters in Matthew we see Jesus transferring authority to the apostles in regard to issues of faith, scripture, doctrine and practice for the community of believers.

²⁰ Lightfoot, John. (1979) *Commentary on the New Testament from Hebraica and Talmud, Volume 2*, p. 237.

²¹ Lightfoot, John. (1979) *Commentary on the New Testament from Hebraica and Talmud, Volume 2*, p. 240.

²² Bivin and Blizzard. (1984) *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, p. 147.

²³ Juster, Dan. (1992) *Due Process*, p. 43.

There are some common misconceptions in the Church today about this idea of binding and loosing. Most believers do not understand that it is an idiom, or how to interpret or apply it. There are those, such as John MacArthur, who understand that the idiom is about authority that was being given to the apostles and that apostolic authority was not in themselves or even in their office. Their authority was from heaven. However, MacArthur then relates it to all believers in the modern day Church. He states:

Christians can authoritatively declare what is acceptable to God or forbidden by Him because they have His Word. Christians do not determine what is right or wrong, forgiven or unforgiven. Rather, on the basis of God's own Word, they recognize and proclaim what God has already determined to be right or wrong, forgiven or unforgiven²⁴.

While there is truth to what MacArthur is saying, it is dismissing the difference between apostolic authority within the community of believers and the common sense, biblical knowledge of the members of the community and their obligation to live according to Scripture. It is possible that this "apostolic authority" (or authority of the community leaders) was intended to be successive based on the idea of authoritative rabbinic succession in Tractate Avot 1:1 of the Talmud. That being the case, the office of apostleship (or community leadership in this case) would have held the authority and would have been passed on successively, at least until the Dispersion. We see this apostolic authority being exercised in a rabbinic fashion in Acts 15 as the leaders of the movement make a religious (and also judicial) ruling on how Gentiles must observe the Torah in order to create harmony and fellowship within the suddenly diverse Body of Believers. In the specific case of Matthew 16 and 18, Jesus was explicitly bestowing

²⁴ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Matthew 16-23*, p. 34.

authority to the disciples as leaders to govern the fledgling movement. He was not bestowing this authority on all the members within the entire movement.

The second misconception of this passage, due to ignorance of the idiom, is that believers have the authority to “bind” and “loose” spiritual entities such as Satan and demons. It is now clear from our understanding of the idiom that binding and loosing was in regard to the practice of faith from an authoritative standpoint – not spiritual warfare.

However, there are other New Testament verses that use the same words in English translations. For example, in the Gospel of Luke we find a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years. Jesus heals her on the Sabbath and says to the crowd, “And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?” (Luke 13:16). There are those that would argue that if Satan had “bound” the woman, can we not engage in the same spiritual battle by declaring Satan and his demons to be bound as well? Secondly, we find in Revelation, “And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison” (Revelation 20:1-2, 7). This could serve as reinforcement for the idea that we have the authority to “bind” Satan, as is popular in certain Christian circles. However, in doing so, our misconceptions and ignorance influence our theology perhaps more than the actual meaning of Scripture.

Conclusion

The scope of our examination has been extremely limited in only looking at three Hebraic idioms in Matthew. Not only does Matthew have many more, but the Synoptic Gospels as a whole are filled with these idioms. First of all, their mere existence in the text suggests to us elements of the origins of the text and the context of the subject matter. Secondly, we see Jesus in the context of his time and his element. Within the abolish and fulfill idiom, we see that Jesus was not claiming to do away with the Torah (even by “fulfilling” it) but that he was engaged in a rabbinic discussion in which he claimed superiority in the teaching of the Torah. In the second idiom – the eye is the lamp to the body – we find that Jesus’ teaching style was common of his day and served the people appropriately. In the binding and loosing idiom, Jesus passes on authority to the apostles in the same fashion as the rabbinic succession of his day. These idioms served to affirm Jesus’ claims, authority and position as rabbi, Messiah and Son of God.

Unfortunately through the past 2,000 years we have divorced ourselves from the context of Scripture. By doing so, we have lost the intended meaning of Scripture and have become ignorant of the world in which Jesus lived and taught. The dangers of this have been brutally apparent – anti-Semitism in the Church, Replacement Theology, misinterpretation of Scripture and incorrect theology. However, the last few decades have brought on the beginnings of a reversal to re-establish the context of Jesus’ teachings which have led to many inquiries such as this paper. Only by understanding the world of Jesus can we ever understand His words.

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