Avoiding Pastoral Malpractice: Implications of the Study of Biblical Languages for Spiritual Care

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In "Twilight of the Idols" Nietzsche made the following intriguing

observation: "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have

faith in grammar."[1] Though no friend of Christianity, Nietzsche had an

uncanny knack for understanding the Christian faith even better than

many of its adherents do, and this is one place where he

demonstrates remarkable insight into a connection that often goes

unnoticed: the link between God and grammar. Nietzsche saw that

the Christian conception of God entails belief in a fundamental unity

and logic to reality that extends from its macrostructure in the orderly

predictability of the cosmos all the way down to its innumerable

microstructures, including the linguistic logic of grammar that enables

meaningful communication.

It is surely no accident that philosophy in the mid to late 20th

century, taking its cue from Nietzsche, was obsessed with language,

committing itself to destabilizing the relationship between sign and

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[1] Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Twilight of the Idols*. Translated by Walter
Kaufmann and R. J Hollingdale. Place of Publication Not Identified: CreateSpace
Independent Publishing Platform, 2012.

referent, between syntax and sense, between rhetoric and reality. The effects of the erosion of faith in grammar are obvious in the larger culture. Perhaps less obvious, however, are the ways these ideas have quietly crept into our churches and seminaries.

David Roach noted in a blog posted on April 25, 2014 that biblical languages training for ministerial candidates has sharply declined over the past fifty years. He states and I quote:

"Across America, there has been a marked decrease of biblical language training for Christian ministers over the past 200 years. Consider Princeton Theological Seminary, where as recently as 1950 candidates for the bachelor of divinity (the precursor to the master of divinity) were required to take exams in Greek competency before beginning their course of study, and take remedial classes if they didn't pass.[3] By 2013 though, language study was no longer even a required portion of the master of divinity curriculum at Princeton.[4] Indeed, one of the main accrediting bodies for theological schools in the US and Canada, the Association of Theological Schools, does not require a seminary to offer Greek or Hebrew in order to have an accredited master of divinity program.

The most powerful preachers and theologians of ages past likely would regard this as ministerial malpractice. For, instance, Augustine of Hippo, the great theologian and North African bishop, said men who "speak the common tongue" need "two other languages for the study of Scripture: Hebrew and Greek." The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther said that "we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages . . . the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained."[2]

Even though Roach does not make the connection between this decline in biblical language training for ministerial candidates and the crisis of meaning in language in contemporary philosophy, it is not hard to see the correlation. Why invest so much time and effort in studying ancient languages and the minutiae of original texts if textual meaning is fundamentally unstable and, therefore, incapable of approximating either the human or the divine author's communicative intent? Surely the plethora of English translations will suffice for the kind of language games and interpretive play advocated by such luminaries as Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Derrida.

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[2] Roach, David. "The Decline of Biblical Languages." The BibleMesh Blog. April 25, 2014. Accessed April 12, 2018. https://biblemesh.com/blog/the-decline-of-biblical-languages/.

I state the situation this way not because anyone who represents traditional Christianity is actually saying anything like this, but rather to shock us into realizing that this is the underlying influence, the unspoken and, perhaps, even unrecognized assumption that has eroded the church's commitment to insisting on and supporting its ministers' early and continued study of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic.

Even this, however, is to represent the situation in terms too academic, abstract, and theoretical to appreciate the pastoral and spiritual implications of the erosion of the knowledge of biblical languages among the clergy. The burden of the rest of this lecture will be to give concrete examples of pastoral malpractice that may arise from a lack of felicity with the biblical languages.

Example 1: Homosexual Practice in the Contemporary Church

In 1980, John Boswell, professor of history at Yale University, published his famous book, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* in which he argued, among other things, that the

Scriptures do not prohibit homosexual relationships per se.[3] In

support of this assertion, Boswell engaged in an innovative rereading

of the relevant texts in the Old and New Testaments that seriously

challenged Christianity's historic rejection of same sex relations as a

legitimate option for disciples of Jesus Christ.

Boswell's exegetical arguments, many of which turn on the

lexical semantics of specific Greek terms in Romans 1, have been

hugely influential in many churches resulting in a dramatic shift of

policy on this issue. However, even to Boswell's surprise and

disappointment, his exegetical arguments were initially ignored or

accepted without question. His hope had been to provoke a lively and

helpful debate with experts in OT and NT studies more familiar with

the issues of the interpretation of Greek and Hebrew texts than he.

Six years after the publication of Boswell's book, Richard B. Hays,

Professor of NT at Duke University offered a thorough and

substantive critique of Boswell's exegesis.

At the heart of Hays' critique is a careful analysis of the Greek

phrase Paul uses twice in Romans 1:26-27. Paul characterizes same

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[3] John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

sex relations as the exchange of "natural relations for that which is contrary to nature" (μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν).[4] Boswell argues that the Greek term "physis" refers not to some universal natural order but to the individual nature of the person in question. Furthermore, he argues that the preposition *para* + the accusative in the phrase, which has traditionally been translated "against or in opposition to," means instead "in excess of" or "beyond." This allows Boswell to argue that what Paul is condemning is not the sexual union of two persons who are by their nature homosexual, but rather the homosexual activity of those who are, by their nature, heterosexual.

Hayes, however, correctly points out that the binary *kata physis/para physis* regularly occurs in the literature of the Hellenistic moral philosophers and especially Hellenistic Jewish writers to contrast appropriate sexual unions that conform to the natural order with inappropriate sexual unions that defy the natural order.[5] By "defy the natural order" these texts mean engagement in sexual activity

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[4] Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (Spring, 1986): 184 – 215.

[5] Ibid,192-193.

that has no possibility of fulfilling the reproductive goal of sexual union. Thus, a careful survey of the phrase's usage in the broader Hellenistic literature seriously calls into question Boswell's contention that *physis* cannot refer to some kind of natural law (especially in light of the Stoic concept of the "law of nature"). Furthermore, contrary to Boswell's claims, the phrase as a whole was frequently used to condemn homosexual activity categorically.

To follow and assess Hayes' argument, however, one must have a working knowledge of Greek. Church leaders who help individuals and churches navigate a confusing social and moral landscape that is littered with conflicting expert opinions and interpretations need the kind of discernment that is informed by this kind of analysis of biblical languages. Furthermore, as Hayes demonstrates in the aforementioned debate, if pastors and scholars are going to defend the historic Christian faith against its cultured despisers, at least some of our clergy must have sufficient proficiency in the languages to read not only the biblical texts, but also relevant cognate texts from the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds.

Example 2: Proverbs 22:6 and Parental Guilt

On more than one occasion parents whose adult children have abandoned the Christian faith have expressed to me how deeply it hurts when Proverbs 22:6 is read in church, or worse when it is offered as an explanation for why their children no longer believe. The familiar text is traditionally rendered "Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Of course, ancient proverbs are beset with a number of hermeneutical complexities that must be taken into account. Furthermore, perhaps no section of Scripture is more challenging to translate accurately given a proverb's brevity, lack of context, and heavy reliance on sophisticated rhetorical and literary devices. This proverb in particular, however, has frequently been oversimplified and misapplied due, at least in part, to mistranslation.

The initial imperative "train up" is actually חֲנֹךְ from a root usually associated with devoting or dedicating (as in the Jewish Feast of Dedication, Hanukkah). The phrase "the way he should go" (עַל־פִּי דַרְכּוֹ) is actually a prepositional phrase which, rendered literally, states "according to the mouth of his way" - a Hebrew idiom indicating

the authoritative influences in a young person's life that tend to determine the habits that will eventually define character. Interestingly, as Douglas Stuart points out, one finds no verb in Hebrew corresponding to the word "should go" so often found in our English translations.[6] Furthermore, the word "way" in Proverbs is morally neutral when it lacks qualifiers. Indeed, when followed by a pronominal suffix it often indicates one's own selfish or foolish way.[7] Consider the following two proverbs as examples.

There is <u>a way</u> (דרך) that seems right to a man,
 but its end is the way to death. (Proverbs 14:12 repeated in
  16:25)

When a man's folly brings his way (דרכו) to ruin,
 his heart rages against the LORD. (Proverbs 19:3)

 With these considerations in mind the proverb in Hebrew is better read: "Dedicate a child to his own way and when he is old he will be unable to repent." The point of the proverb is not to guarantee that the right kind of parenting will produce a faithful, godly child, much less to blame parents for their adult children's lack of faith. As Clifford has suggested, the verse employs biting irony, making the

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[6] Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 42-43.

[7] Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 197.

point that if you "let a boy do what he wants and he will become a self-willed adult incapable of change."[8]

Whichever translation one prefers, and scholars do remain divided over how best to render this proverb, awareness of the ambiguities and possibilities in the original text provides additional tools and insights for pastoral care. The ability to give parishioners legitimate options in biblical interpretation and to guide them through reasoned consideration of a text's possible meanings contributes significantly to the healing process as well as to the development of spiritual discernment.

Aspect, Aktionsart, and Adultery in Matthew 19:9

Parishioners who have endured painful divorces and eventually remarried often feel like second-class citizens in our churches. This is due in large part to conflicted feelings regarding the legitimacy of their second (or third, or fourth marriage). I have even heard pastors counsel couples in a second (or third, or fourth) marriage to divorce

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[8] Ibid.

each other and either return to their original spouses or remain unmarried.[9]

The reason often offered for such drastic and damaging counsel rests on an understanding of the Greek verb Matthew employs to convey Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:9. Jesus says, "But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except on grounds of sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery and whoever marries a divorcee commits adultery." The word "commits adultery" is a present indicative verb. Some have argued that the present tense in Greek indicates on-going action.[10] Therefore, it is proposed by those who hold this understanding of the Greek present verb that couples who are in a second marriage are committing perpetual adultery and will continue doing so until they end their current, illegitimate marriage.

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[9] As an example of one minister who insists on dissolution of a second marriage after an unscriptural divorce see Wayne Jackson, *The Teaching of Jesus Christ on Divorce and Remarriage* (Jackson, TN: Christian Courier Publications, 2002): 1-32.

[10] Note, for example, the following statement: "There are therefore, three fundamental tenses in Greek: the present, representing continuous action; the perfect, representing completed action; and the aroist... representing indefinite action." Cf. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: MacMillan, 1955.

At the heart of this misunderstanding of Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage is a confusion or conflation of two linguistic concepts: aspect and Aktionsart. This confusion/conflation had its origin in the grammatical work of Karl Brugmann who coined the term Aktionsart.[11] Brugmann used the term as a catchall category for what linguists now recognize as three distinct features of the semantics of verbs: type of action (Aktionsart), aspect, and *Verbalcharacter* (lexical meaning of the verb).[12]

The mistake sometimes made in the interpretation of Matthew 19:9 is in taking the present indicative verb for "commits adultery" (μοιχᾶται) to entail inherently iterative action. In other words, the adultery committed in remarriage is perpetual or on-going. This ignores the important distinction between verbal aspect, a grammaticalized and uncancelable feature of the verb (i.e. necessary and inherent to the form of the verb), and Aktionsart, a lexicalized and cancelable feature (i.e. NOT necessary or inherent to the form of the

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[11] Karl Brugmann, *Griechische Grammatik: Lautlehre, Stammbildungs- und Flexionslehre, Syntax* (München: Beck, 1913)

[12] A. K. Młynarczyk, "Aspectual Pairing in Polish" (Ph.D. diss, Utrecht University, 2004), 36.

verb).[13] While it is true to say that the so called present tense in Greek conveys imperfective aspect this should not be confused with the very different, and incorrect, claim that the present tense, in-and-of-itself, conveys iterative action (or any othe kind of action).

Had Matthew intended to represent Jesus' teaching as conveying that the adultery committed in the remarriage is perpetual, he would have included an adverbial modifier such as ἀδιαλείπτως or καθ᾽ ἡμέραν. There is, therefore, no implication that the adultery is perpetual and no requirement that the second (or third or fourth) marriage be dissolved in order to complete repentance and be restored to full fellowship with God and the church. In fact, repentance for one who has repeatedly broken covenantal vows is to finally keep them, even at one's own detriment (Psalm 15:4), not to break them yet again.

Those preparing to enter the ministry only encounter Important linguistic distinctions such as these in curricula that place an emphasis on reading proficiency of biblical languages. As a result of this training, pastors are able to sift through the avalanche of

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[13] Carl Bache, "Aspect and Aktionsart: Towards a Semantic Distinction," *Journal of Linguistics* 18 (March 1982): 57 – 72.

positions, opinions, and counsel that clutters the internet and confuses parishioners. Most importantly, it prevents pastors from offering damaging counsel to couples who question the status of their second (or third or fourth) marriage.

The Identity of the Satan in the OT

As a professor of Old Testament, I frequently have occasion to teach the book of Job. I remember one occasion when I was lecturing through the narrative prologue of the book and a student raised his hand. I could tell from the look on this student's face that he was deeply troubled, so I paused and let him ask his question. His question had to do with the troubling implications arising from YHWH making a deal with the Devil. Particularly troubling to him was the following statement YHWH addressed to the Satan regarding Job: ''He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason."

I knew from previous conversations that this student was already seriously questioning his Christian faith. The idea that God could be moved by the Devil to act against one of his own human creatures would surely deal another severe blow to his faith in God.

Furthermore, this conundrum potentially called into question

Scripture's overall unity and harmony since James asserts that God

cannot be so tempted (James 1:13).

Once again, the blessing of my training in Hebrew came to my

rescue. The term "satan" in Hebrew simply means "adversary" or

"opposition" and is, therefore, not always used in Scripture as the

personal name for God's and our archenemy – the Devil. This opens

the possibility of seeing the satan in Job 1-2, not as the Devil, but

rather as an agent of YHWH, a member of YHWH's divine council

who functions somewhat like a prosecuting attorney (cf. e.g. the

satan in Zechariah 3).[14] The satan's role, therefore, is to bring to the

council's attention potential problems in the divine-human relationship

that need to be corrected. In this case, that problem would be the

tendency of Job and his three friends to misconstrue the divine

human relationship as a mechanical, quid pro quo, retributive system.

Places in the Hebrew Bible where the term "satan" clearly does

not refer to the Devil include the following: Num. 22:22, 32; 1 Sam

29:4; 2 Sam 19:23; 1 Kgs 5:4 (MT 5:18); 11:14, 23, 25. In the case of

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[14] John H. Walton, *The Book of Job* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 66-67.

Num. 22:22, 32, the angel of YHWH who stands in Balaam's way is referred as a "satan." The passages in Samuel and Kings all refer to human enemies, armies of nations and the like. For example, God raises up Jeroboam son of Nebat to serve as a satan against Solomon. The evidence indicates that both angels and humans can function in the role of a satan.

I would even go so far as to say that the term "satan" in the Hebrew Bible never, as best as I can tell, refers to the Devil. Rather, the Devil is not revealed as the archenemy of God and his people until the New Testament which itself depends on the developing angelology of intertestamental literature (e.g. 1 Enoch 54:6). The Devil is real and presumably existed throughout the period covered by the Hebrew Bible, but was simply not revealed as the satan par excellence to Israel. Perhaps delaying this disclosure served as a safeguard against dualism or a lapse back into polytheism.

This becomes important when dealing with a potentially troubling parallel to 2 Samuel 24:1 in 1 Chronicles 21:1. 2 Samuel 24:1 states that YHWH's anger was kindled against Israel and that YHWH himself incited David against them. The Chronicler's version

of this story, however, states that Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel (so the ESV). I remember once being confronted by a sharp agnostic student with this apparent contradiction which she used as justification for her agnosticism. She pointed out that for Scripture to attribute the same action to both God and Satan (understood as the Devil) was at the very least extremely problematic for traditional Christian theology.

I think she would have a point if, in fact, this text were referencing the Devil. Indeed, the English translations without fail treat "satan" here as a proper noun. This follows a lengthy exegetical tradition that treats this text as the decisive stage in the development of the generic term "satan" into the proper name for the Devil on the basis that the term occurs here without the article unlike its occurrence in Job 1-2. The assumption is then made that the term functions in 1 Chronicles 21:1 as proper name.

As Sarah Japhet points out, however, this interpretation is highly unlikely. She proposes instead that the absence of the article simply indicates an indefinite noun, as is usually the case in Hebrew. The reference in 1 Chronicles 21:1, therefore, is not to the Devil but

to an adversary of some kind. Furthermore, nothing in the context of

1 Chronicles 21 suggests that the adversary in question is a

supernatural being.[15] A more straightforward reading of the text,

therefore, is that YHWH employed a human adversary to provoke the

census that launched the deadly plague. When read this way, 1

Chronicles 21:1 can be easily harmonized with 2 Samuel 24:1 and

poses no threat to the traditional Christian conception of God as holy

and diametrically opposed to all moral evil.

Once again, knowledge of biblical languages, both their lexical

semantics and their syntactic structure, is critical in working out such

theological problems. Without these tools at my disposal, I would be

stumped even more frequently than I already am when confronted

with probing theological questions by students and parishioners. I

owe a great debt to my teachers that I seek to pay forward by joining

them in the task of passing this knowledge on to future generations.

Unfortunately, it is no longer enough to teach these languages. We

must now also offer a robust apologia for their place in the theological

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[15] Sarah Japhet, *1 & 2 Chronicles* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 374.

curriculum – an apologia directed not only to our students but to the church and to the administrators of our institutions as well.

Can you imagine someone who aspires to enter the medical field opting out of a course in human anatomy? If not, then neither can we countenance the scenario of one who aspires to enter the ministry and to teach Scripture in the church avoiding the study of the biblical languages. If we believe, contra much contemporary continental philosophy, that human language is a medium capable of conveying coherent communication, and if we believe that God has used this medium to coherently convey his will, then the conclusion seems inescapable. Instruction in the biblical languages is a vital part of any responsible theological curriculum. To discount it or diminish its importance leaves us vulnerable to the charge of ministerial malpractice.

With this in mind I offer these reflections to you in the hopes that these few examples of the pastoral value of the knowledge of biblical languages will inspire you to do two things: first, to commit yourself to lifelong study of the Scriptures in the original languages, and, second, to demand a theological education for yourselves and

for future generations of ministers based upon intimate acquaintance

with the original texts of the Old and New Testaments.