

Quotes – Biblical Languages

B.B. Warfield

No second hand knowledge of the revelation of God for the salvation of a ruined world can suffice the needs of a ministry whose function it is to convey this revelation to men, commend it to their acceptance and apply it in detail to their needs—to all their needs, from the moment they are called into participation in the grace of God, until the moment when they stand perfect in God's sight, built up by his Spirit into new men. For such a ministry as this the most complete knowledge of the wisdom of the world supplies no equipment; the most fervid enthusiasm of service leaves without furnishing. Nothing will suffice for it but to know; to know the book; to know it at first hand; and to know it through and through. And what is required first of all for training men for such a ministry is that the book should be given them in its very words [Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek] as it has come from God's hand and in the fullness of its meaning, as that meaning has been ascertained by the labors of generations of men of God who have brought to bear upon it all the resources of sanctified scholarship and consecrated thought.

—B. B. Warfield

Selected Shorter Writings—I
Our Seminary Curriculum

Martin Luther

And let us be sure of this, we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out, they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall ... lose the gospel ...

Experience too has proved this and still gives evidence of it. For as soon as the languages declined to the vanishing point, after the apostolic age, the gospel and faith and Christianity itself declined more and more ... On the other hand, now that the languages have been revived, they are bringing with them so bright a light and accomplishing such great things that the whole world stands amazed and has to acknowledge that we have the gospel just as pure and undefiled as the apostles had it, that it has been wholly restored to its original purity, far beyond what it was in the days of St. Jerome and St. Augustine ...

Yes, you say, but many of the fathers were saved and even became teachers without the languages. That is true. But how do you account for the fact that they so often erred in the Scriptures?... Even St. Augustine himself is obliged to confess... that a Christian teacher who is to expound the Scriptures must know Greek and Hebrew in addition to Latin. Otherwise, it is impossible to avoid constant stumbling; indeed, there are plenty of problems to work out even when one is well versed in the languages.

There is a vast difference therefore between a simple preacher of the faith and a person who expounds Scripture, or, as St. Paul puts it, a prophet. A simple preacher (it is true) has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages. Now there must always be such prophets in the Christian church who can dig into Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations. A saintly life and right doctrine are not enough. Hence languages are absolutely and altogether necessary in the Christian church, as are the prophets or interpreters; although it is not necessary that every Christian or every preacher be such a prophet, as St. Paul points out in I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 ...

Since it becomes Christians then to make good use of the Holy Scriptures as their one and only book and it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God, it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be an open book. O how happy the dear fathers would have been if they had had our opportunity to study the languages and come thus prepared to the Holy Scriptures! What great toil and effort it cost them to gather up a few crumbs, while we with half the labor—yes, almost without any labor at all—can acquire the whole loaf! O how their effort puts our indolence to shame! Yes, how sternly God will judge our lethargy and ingratitude!

Here belongs also what St. Paul calls for in I Corinthians 14, namely, that in the Christian church all teachings must be judged. For this a knowledge of the language is needful above all else. The preacher or teacher can expound the Bible from beginning to end as he pleases, accurately or inaccurately, if there is no one there to judge whether he is doing it right or wrong. But in order to judge, one must have a knowledge of the languages; it cannot be done in any other way. Therefore, although faith and the gospel may indeed be proclaimed by simple preachers without a knowledge of languages, such preaching is flat and tame; people finally become weary and bored with it, and it falls to the ground. But where the preacher is versed in the languages, there is a freshness and vigor in his preaching, Scripture is treated in its entirety, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and illustrations. Hence, Psalm 129 likens such scriptural studies to a hunt, saying to the deer God opens the dense forests; and Psalm 1 likens them to a tree with a plentiful supply of water, whose leaves are always green.

— Martin Luther

The Jews drink out of the original spring, the Greeks out of the stream flowing out of the stream, the Latins, however, out of the puddle.

— Martin Luther, Table Talk

For the devil smelled a rat, and perceived that if the [biblical] languages were revived a hole would be knocked in his kingdom which he could not easily stop up again. Since he found he could not prevent their revival, he now aims to keep them on such slender rations that they will of themselves decline and pass away. They are not a welcome guest in his house, so he plans to offer them such meager entertainment that they will not prolong their stay. Very few of us, my dear sirs see through this evil design of the devil.

—Martin Luther, 1524

In all sciences, the ablest professors are they who have thoroughly mastered the texts. A man, to be a good jurisconsult, should have every text of the law at his fingers' ends; but in our time, the attention is applied rather to glosses and commentaries. When I was young, I read the Bible over and over and over again, and was so perfectly acquainted with it, that I could, in an instant, have pointed to any verse that might have been mentioned. I then read the commentators, but I soon threw them aside, for I found therein many things my conscience could not approve, as being contrary to the sacred text. 'Tis always better to see with one's own eyes than with those of other people.

— Martin Luther, Table Talk 33

In the Psalm it is said: Their voice went out into the whole world. But St Paul to the Romans gives it thus: "Their sound went out into all the earth," which is all one. Many sentences are in the Bible, wherein St Paul observed the translation of the Seventy Interpreters, for he condemned them not; and whereas he was preacher to the Greeks, therefore he was constrained to preach as they understood.

In such sort did he use that sentence, 1 Corinthians 15: "Death is swallowed up in victory," whereas in the Hebrew, it is "in the end;" ye 'tis all one. St Paul was very rich and flowing in words; one of his words contains three of Cicero's orations, or the whole of Isaiah and Jeremiah. O! he was an excellent preacher; he is not in vain named vas electum. Our Lord God said: I will give a preacher to the world that shall be precious. There was never any that understood the Old Testament so well as St Paul, except John the Baptist, and John the Divine. St Peter excels also. St Matthew and the rest well describe the histories, which are very necessary; but as to the things and words of the Old Testament, they never mention what is couched therein.

St Paul translated much out of Hebrew into Greek, which none besides were able to do; in handling one chapter, he often expounds four, five, or six. Oh, he dearly loved Moses and Isaiah, for they, together with king David, were the chief prophets. The words and things of St Paul are taken out of Moses and the Prophets.

Young divines ought to study Hebrew, to the end that they may be able to compare Greek and Hebrew words together, and discern their properties, nature and strength.

—Martin Luther, Table Talk (CCCCXXV)

"In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone – the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his Word, then we too ought to honor them above

all others. . . . Let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held.”

--Martin Luther, 1524

Ulrich Zwingli

Once a young man is instructed in the solid virtue which is formed by faith, it follows that he will regulate himself and richly adorn himself from within: for only he whose whole life is ordered finds it easy to give help and counsel to others. But a man cannot rightly order his own soul unless he exercises himself day and night in the Word of God. He can do that most readily if he is well versed in such languages as Hebrew and Greek, for a right understanding of the Old Testament is difficult without the one, and a right understanding of the New is equally difficult without the other.

But we are instructing those who have already learned the rudiments, and everywhere Latin has the priority. In these circumstances I do not think that Latin should be altogether neglected. For an understanding of Holy Scripture it is of less value than Hebrew and Greek, but for other purposes it is just as useful. And it often happens that we have to do the business of Christ amongst those who speak Latin. No Christian should use these languages simply for his own profit or pleasure: for languages are gifts of the Holy Ghost.

After Latin we should apply ourselves to Greek. We should do this for the sake of the New Testament, as I have said already. And if I may say so, to the best of my knowledge the Greeks have always handled the doctrine of Christ better than the Latins. For that reason we should always direct our young men to this source. But in respect of Greek as well as Latin we should take care to garrison our souls with innocence and faith, for in these tongues there are many things which we learn only to our hurt: wantonness, ambition, violence, cunning, vain philosophy and the like. But the soul . . . can steer safely past all these if it is only forewarned, that is, if at the first sound of the voices it pays heed to the warning: Hear this in order to shun and not to receive.

I put Hebrew last because Latin is in general use and Greek follows conveniently. Otherwise I would willingly have given Hebrew precedence, for in many places even amongst the Greeks those who are ignorant of Hebrew forms of speech have great difficulty in attempting to draw out the true sense of Scripture. But it is not my purpose to speak exhaustively of these languages.

If a man would penetrate to the heavenly wisdom, with which no earthly wisdom ought rightly to be considered, let alone compared, it is with such arms that he must be equipped. And even then he must still approach with a humble and thirsting spirit.

–Ulrich Zwingli

Sir Edwyn Hoskyns

Bury yourself in a lexicon and arise in the presence of God!

– Sir Edwyn Hoskyns

Jim Elliot

Feel ‘poured out’ over a great many interests with intense desire to do but so little power and time to accomplish . . . Hebrew: I can think of nothing I’d like better than to be able to pick up a page of the Hebrew Old Testament and read it at sight. Greek loses a lot of its challenge when one gets to know a little.

– Jim Elliot, College Journals

John Wesley

“The main point is, with all and above all, study the Greek and Hebrew Bible, and the love of Christ.

–John Wesley

George Mueller

I now studied much, about 12 hours a day, chiefly Hebrew . . . [and] committed portions of the Hebrew Old Testament to memory; and this I did with prayer, often falling on my knees . . . I looked up to the Lord even whilst turning over the leaves of my Hebrew dictionary.

— George Mueller, 1829
(twenty-four years old)

In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah (Hebrew), but the language of his own people. So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair . . .

—Nehemiah 13:23-25

Cornelius Van Til

Let me, to begin with, stress the fact that I think we both have essentially the same goal before us in our work. We are seeking to have modern man, in particular modern educated young men and women, accept Jesus Christ as he speaks to us with absolute and infallible authority in the original languages of the Old and New Testament as the Savior and Lord.

--In A Letter from Cornelius Van Til
to Francis Schaeffer
March 11, 1969

Bruce Waltke

I became motivated to comprehend the biblical languages when I realized that most of my knowledge of God was derived from Holy Scripture, and the accuracy of that knowledge was contingent upon the correctness with which I handled the languages. God incarnated himself in those languages, not only in the body of Jesus Christ to whom they point . . . The logic of this Christian theology, that God revealed himself through the Scripture, inescapably led me to the conclusion that the authenticity of that knowledge rested on a precise understanding of the biblical languages.

—Professor Bruce Waltke, 1993
NAPH Conference Address

Heinrich Bitzer

The more a theologian detaches himself from the basic Hebrew and Greek text of Holy Scripture, the more he detaches himself from the source of real theology! And real theology is the foundation of a fruitful and blessed ministry.”

—Heinrich Bitzer, *Light on the Path*

Other

And most seminaries, evangelical as well as liberal, have communicated by their curriculum emphases that learning Greek and Hebrew may have some value for a few rare folks but is optional for the pastoral ministry.

Several things happen as the original languages fall into disuse among pastors. First, the confidence of pastors to determine the precise meaning of Biblical texts diminishes. And with the confidence to interpret rigorously goes the confidence to preach powerfully. It is difficult to preach week in and week out over the whole range of God’s revelation with depth and power if you are plagued with uncertainty when you venture beyond basic gospel generalities . . . So the preacher often contents himself with the general focus or flavor of the text, and his exposition lacks the precision and clarity which excite a congregation with the Word of God. Boring generalities are a curse in many pulpits.

Another result when pastors do not study the Bible in Greek and Hebrew is that they, and their churches with them, tend to become second-handers. The harder it is for us to get at the original meaning of the Bible, the more we will revert to the

secondary literature. For one thing, it is easier to read. It also gives us a superficial glow that we are “keeping up” on things. And it provides us with ideas and insights which we can’t dig out of the original for ourselves.

We may impress one another for a while by dropping the name of the latest book we’ve read, but secondhand food will not sustain and deepen our people’s faith and holiness.

Weakness in Greek and Hebrew also gives rise to exegetical imprecision and carelessness. And exegetical imprecision is the mother of liberal theology.

Where pastors can no longer articulate and defend doctrine by a reasonable and careful appeal to the original meaning of Biblical texts, they will tend to become close-minded traditionalists who clutch their inherited ideas, or open-ended pluralists who don’t put much stock in doctrinal formulations. In both cases the succeeding generations will be theologically impoverished and susceptible to error.

One of the greatest tragedies in the church today is the depreciation of the pastoral office. From seminaries to denominational headquarters, the prevalent mood and theme is managerial, organizational, and psychological. And we think thereby to heighten our professional self-esteem! Hundreds of teachers and leaders put the mastery of the Word first *with their lips* but by their curriculums, conferences, seminars, and personal example, show that it is not foremost.

One glaring example is the nature of the doctor of ministry programs across the country.

The theory is good: continuing education makes for better ministers. But where can you do a D.Min. in Hebrew language and exegesis? Yet what is more important and more deeply *practical* for the pastoral office than advancing in Greek and Hebrew exegesis by which we mine God’s treasures?

Why then do hundreds of young and middle-aged pastors devote years of effort to everything but the languages when pursuing continuing education? And why do seminaries not offer incentives and degrees to help pastors maintain the most important pastoral skill – exegesis of the original meaning of Scripture?

No matter what we say about the inerrancy of the Bible, our actions reveal our true convictions about its centrality and power.

We need to recover our vision of the pastoral office – which embraces, if nothing else, the passion and power to understand the original revelation of God. We need to pray for the day when pastors can carry their Greek Testaments to conferences and seminars without being greeted with one-liners – the day when the esteem of God’s Word and its careful exposition is so high among pastors that those who do not have the skill will humbly bless and encourage those who do and will encourage younger men to get what they never got. Oh, for the day when prayer and grammar will meet each other with great spiritual combustion!

An evangelical believes that God humbled himself not only in the incarnation of the Son, but also in the inspiration of the Scriptures. The manger and the cross were not sensational. Neither are grammar and syntax. But that is how God chose to reveal himself. A poor Jewish peasant and a prepositional phrase have this in common, they are both human and both ordinary. That the poor peasant was God and the prepositional phrase is the Word of God does not change this fact. Therefore, if God humbled himself to take on human flesh and to speak human language, woe to us if we arrogantly presume to ignore the humanity of Christ and the grammar of Scripture.

Herman Witsius

Let him [the true theologian] apply himself diligently to the acquisition of different languages, and especially of those which God has distinguished by making them the channels of conveyance for his heavenly oracles, that he may understand God when he speaks, as it were, in his own language, that he who acts as the interpreter of God and hears the word at his mouth, may not require an interpreter for himself.

—Herman Witsius

From “On the Character of a True Theologian”
Inaugural Address, University of Franeker, 1675

John Owen

Not only is this the only well from which we can draw the original force and meaning of the words and phrases of divine utterance, but also those languages (esp. Hebrew) possess a weight of their own – a vividness which brings home to the understanding fine shades of meaning with power which cannot survive the passage into another tongue.

John Calvin, Martin Luther, among others

Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your bride through a veil.

— John Owen
Theologoumena

William Tyndale

A letter Tyndale wrote to the jailer watching him before he was executed

I beg your lordship, and that of the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh, which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin; a piece of cloth too to patch my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woollen shirt, if he will be good enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth to put on above; he has also warmer night-caps. And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study. In return may you obtain what you most desire, so only that it be for the salvation of your soul. But if any other decision has been taken concerning me, to be carried out before winter, I will be patient, abiding the will of God, to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ: whose spirit (I pray) may ever direct your heart. Amen W. Tindalus⁵⁷

A.T. Robertson

It ought to be taken for granted that the preacher has his Greek Testament. This statement will be challenged by many who excuse themselves from making any effort to know the Greek New Testament. I do not say that every preacher should become an expert in his knowledge of the New Testament Greek. That cannot be expected. I do not affirm that no preacher should be allowed to preach who does not possess some knowledge of the original New Testament. I am opposed to such a restriction. But a little is a big per cent on nothing, as John A. Broadus used to say. This is preeminently true of the Greek New Testament.

There is no sphere of knowledge where one is repaid more quickly for all the toil expended. Indeed, the Englishman's Greek Concordance almost makes it possible for the man with no knowledge of Greek to know something about it, paradoxical as that may sound. That would be learning made easy, beyond a doubt, and might seem to encourage the charlatan and the quack. It is possible for an ignoramus to make a parade of a little lumber of learning to the disgust and confusion of his hearers. But the chief reason why preachers do not get and do not keep up a fair and needful knowledge of the Greek New Testament is nothing less than carelessness, and even laziness in many cases. They can get along somehow without it, and so let it pass or let it drop.

-A.T. Robertson

The Minister & His Greek New Testament

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