

On Becoming

It all started with this mornings reading in Leviticus 22 which some label “Sundry Rules for Priests” in their service in the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, administering or presiding over the various offerings—some designated, literally, as “gifts” to the Lord. By following these rules they would keep themselves “clean” or qualified for such service. If a priest broke them, he would be unclean—and here is where a question for A.I. turned into a conversation, of sorts, about Hebrew grammar and syntax.

You game!?

There are four (4) different forms or spellings the root word may take for “unclean” or “defiled.” For want of a better way to designate them, let’s use the words the Hebrew grammar book uses: The QAL, the NIPHAL, the PIEL, and the HITHPAEL. The distinction, according to A.I. is:

- Qal = the state or result (“he is/becomes unclean”).
 - “The soul that touches any such shall be unclean until evening” (Lev 22:6).
- Niphal = the subject ends up defiled (often with involvement).
 - Ezekiel 20:43 “”You have been defiled.” Yet not necessarily in an incidental or passive way. He is still responsible for his uncleanness.
- Piel = A priest officially designates something unclean.
 - A.I. argued that stative Hebrew verbs follow this pattern. Stative roots are verbs that in the Qal describe a state or condition, such as “to be unclean,” “to be clean,” “to be holy,” the Piel regularly functions as causative of the state. This means “to cause to be [made official through the priest’s action] in that state”
 - “I now pronounce you unclean, clean, sanctified, etc.”
 - Leviticus 13:20 “The priest shall pronounce him unclean.”
- Hithpael = the subject actively/defiantly/intentionally defiles himself. [mens rea]
 - This is the clearest: Leviticus 18:24 “Don’t defile yourself.”

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It was because A.I. wrote that uncleanness is a “state of being” that I raised a question Thorlief Bowman raised in “Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek” (a work now considered by most scholars, I am told, incorrect.) Bowman understood the language of the Old Testament to be more dynamic (fientive - from the Latin fien, “I will become”). In our parlance, “to be seated” would be better understood in Hebrew, “to sit down.” Better yet, Bowman might call sitting an “active state of mind.” The old adage about an incorrigible child you tell to sit down but they are “standing on the inside.”

I argued that the idea of becoming (entering a state of being) as opposed to being there is a question of tense: present vs past. A.I. agreed but wanted to argue for the existence of a “state of being (clean, unclean, holy, sanctified, etc) in the language of the Old Testament [inchoative and not nascent]. I thought Bowman was not arguing that these are not real states of being in Old Testament parlance, but they are states of an active relationship and as such they are considered dynamic.

You might be thinking of the phrase “to declare righteous” in the Greek. Is this just a status symbol with God or have we entered into a dynamic relationship with Him? “Clean” and “unclean” to many are ceremonial terms but when God 45 times in Leviticus blurts out “I am the Lord!” don’t you get the impression that it means a lot more to Him to call us “His people”? The question before us is whether or not the Ancients would sense this in the language and not just in a smoking mountaintop.

A.I. went on: “The most influential and decisive critique came from James Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961). Barr systematically dismantled Boman’s linguistic arguments, claiming the grammatical and lexical structure of Hebrew versus Greek does not reveal fundamentally different cognitive worlds. “Boman's theory is one of the major examples Barr used to demonstrate what he regarded as the misuse of linguistic evidence in biblical theology.” [OpenAI]

Still with me?

Barr argued::

- Boman confused lexical semantics with philosophical or psychological claims about “Hebrew thought.”

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- My argument here would be: how can a culture separate how they think from the language they use to express it! When are lexical semantics NOT philosophical! This is perhaps better seen as a chicken and the egg argument over which influenced the other. It seems reasonable to assume that the nuance given any term had a cultural reason for being.
- Take John 1:12 “But as many as received him, to them gave he power ‘to become the sons of God,’ even to them that believe on his name.” In a purely stative sense: to become sons, speaks of a change of status with God. “Become” doesn’t mean we are in the process of becoming” [nascent] as if partly saved.
- Boman’s argument, I think, would more correctly point to the relationship in an ongoing or continuing way. “To those who continue to believe on [trust in] Him.”
- The Hebrew equivalent might be Deuteronomy 27:9-10 “Take heed, and hearken, O Israel; this day thou art become [you are] the people of the LORD thy God. Thou shalt therefore obey the voice of the LORD thy God, and do his commandments and his statutes, which I command thee this day.”
- In Hebrew ‘becoming’ is represented by using the verb “to be”, in the Niphal
 - Genesis 2:7 “Man became a living soul.”
 - John. 1:14 “The Word became flesh.”
 - In Deuteronomy, “Israel has entered a new covenantal status.” [OpenAI] I would say “covenantal relationship”
 - Israel’s status with God from now on would be “His people.”
 - In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ “becoming” does not deny His Deity (He did not change from divine to human) nor does it represent a change in status between God and Him (He has always been God’s Son). Nor does “become”

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suggest a process [nascence]. It is descriptive of His incarnation.

- I asked OpenAI to comment on a Hebrew translation of John 1:14 compared to how Aristotle might interpret this verse , and here is what I read,
 - “A Hebrew biblical framework does not normally begin with the Aristotelian question: What substance ... has changed into what other substance? Biblical Hebrew more readily describes what has happened, what someone has become, what status has been entered, what condition now obtains, and what God has done. The statement does not invite the question: “What is the substance of Israel before and after this becoming?” The focus is covenantal status.
- Is there a difference in nuance between status as a legal or cultural position in society and the relationship it describes? If so, does the grammar or syntax accommodate this difference?
- When the preacher said, “It is my privilege to introduce to you, Mr. and Mrs. John King,” I had entered a new reality of husbandhood. Some might say, “No, you have just begun the process of conversion” but most would agree with the IRS that my status has changed from single to married. “Becoming” as a static or fixed status however, alone, does not describe the term “husband” because it is relational and therefore a dynamic concept.
- William Craig argued that “The righteousness of God” is a phrase which speaks to our justification from sin (status) while N.T. Wright took a more dynamic approach calling it “God’s covenantal faithfulness” (relational).
- Romans 5:2 “We have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand” Stand or standing? Do we interpret Paul to be saying our position has changed but not necessary in an

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ongoing way [Galatians 5:1; Ephesians 6:11]. In a Greek sense, the perfect idea designates a continuation of this state of being. Bowman would see this “standing” as an active participation in relationship with God as now His son or daughter. We “have access” doesn’t mean we are walking across the threshold as we speak but we are totally “in.” But to consider this as stative only does not appreciate what this position in Christ is really all about!

- When Boman assumed all Hebrew verbs were dynamic, according to Barr, he had to reinterpret statives to fit this assumption.
- Barr claimed that Bowman failed to compare Hebrew properly with other languages and imported philosophical categories (static vs. dynamic being) that the linguistic data do not support.
- Barr here assumes that what an idea means to a linguist is what it must have meant to Moses!
- Interestingly enough, exegetical grammarians, who do the translating into English, like to explain themselves using Latin terms (like a “Latin gerund” to represent the sense of the Niphal “healed” in Isaiah 53:5). I think Barr would have labeled this synchronic in scope. We struggle to understand something like “the Niphal” when it is so foreign to our language and our way of thinking. We become content to think, “Sounds good!”
- None of this is meant to disparage one’s faith but only to ask the unanswerable, “When I read the Hebrew text, am I understanding it the way Moses or the prophets at the time might have understood it?” I think we might too quickly accept explanations that give us a sense of knowledge but we should prayerfully meditate on God’s Word. Thank God our salvation never depended on ‘what’ we know but ‘Who’!
- Barr points out that etymology, “root meanings,” and supposed national mentalities do not dictate what a word or form means in

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a given text. He is right but no one is arguing for the etymological significance of a word.

- “To baptize” etymologically meant to immerse but this does not mean other forms of water baptism within Christianity are incorrect.
- No serious contemporary Hebraist accepts Boman’s claim that Hebrew verbs as a class privilege [emphasize] activity over state of being.
- Boman’s broader contrast between “dynamic Hebrew thought” and “static Greek thought” is now generally regarded as an outdated example of the “Hebrew mentality” approach that dominated mid-20th-century biblical theology and was decisively challenged by Barr and others.

Here is how I left it. Grok remarked:

“Your point about Moses (or any ancient Israelite) is valid and important: We cannot fully recover the precise conceptual or experiential world in which the original speakers and hearers operated. We have no direct access to “what Moses understood.” All we have is the text as it stands, the broader linguistic and cultural data we can recover, and the history of interpretation. Any modern reading is necessarily an approximation filtered through our own language, categories, and questions.

Responsible scholarship therefore holds two things in tension:

1. We must interpret the text according to the best available evidence of how the language actually functioned in its historical setting (Barr’s insistence).
2. We must remain epistemically humble about the gap between that ancient linguistic world and our own (my insistence).

Barr himself was not naïve about historical distance; his later work shows awareness of it. But some ... treat the text primarily as a modern communicative event, minimizing the strangeness and historical particularity of the ancient language and thought-world.

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The danger is real: a purely “best-fit in modern language” method can quietly replace historical and linguistic discipline with contemporary readability or theological convenience.”

And they may be wrong.

We need the Spirit’s guidance! “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth” - John 16:13.