

Section 3

You Can't Take Some Words Literally!

Biblical Heritage Guideline #13

Every language is laden with idioms and euphemisms.

Vocabulary

Idiom - A word or group of words that cannot be translated literally into another language, and the meaning of it cannot be understood by defining its component parts.

Euphemism - The substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant.

Every language contains words that cannot be translated literally from one language into another. They may create some very difficult situations for Bible readers and translators who do not understand this.

Familiar American Idioms

It is always easier to teach a lesson about idioms by using examples of them. Below are some sentences that contain idioms. The idioms are underlined and in bold type.

Examples	Write your meaning for each idiom.
(1) It's raining cats and dogs outside.	
(2) He really blew a fuse.	
(3) If that happens, I will eat my hat.	
(4) I got it straight from the horse's mouth.	
(5) You really put your foot in your mouth this time.	
(6) You will have to grease his palm.	
(7) You had better not upset the apple cart!	
(8) She is up the creek without a paddle.	
(9) I'll do it when the cows come home!	
(10) Her bark is worse than her bite.	
(11) Don't let the cat out of the bag.	
(12) The boss just gave him the ax.	
(13) Go jump in the lake.	
(14) Lend me a hand.	
(15) He has rocks in his head.	
(16) Don't spill the beans.	

After you write your answers [click here to check answers](#).

Two Idioms That Are Found in the Bible

Idioms are very common and very important linguistic structures. Learning how to recognize and understand their meanings will add a new dimension to your Bible study. But when you don't realize you are reading an idiom or euphemism your mind will usually automatically provide a meaning without you ever being aware of the process.

What would happen if you did not know the above idioms and you interpreted the words literally? Some of the mental pictures a literal understanding of very common idioms would be pretty funny; i.e. "I really **put my foot in my mouth** this time." Can you imagine what someone from a different culture would think?

For centuries millions of Bible readers have been in the same situation because Bible translators have translated Hebrew and Greek idioms literally. The unsuspecting readers read words in their Bibles that simply didn't make any sense. Our minds have a way of dealing with situations like that - they just skip over them and treat them as though they weren't there or substitute another meaning. Jesus used idioms in his teachings too, and his audience clearly understood them. But now, almost two thousand years later, most readers miss the major point of one of his very important messages.

"The light of the body is the eye: If therefore thine **eye be single**, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine **eye be evil**, thy whole body shall be full of darkness . . ."
(Matthew 6.22-23a, KJV)

What do the underlined words mean to you? Think about them for a few minutes before continuing. What do they mean to a modern American? Your mind will probably try to ignore or skip over them because they simply don't make any sense. Don't feel bad because even many professional Bible translators don't seem to have a clue that they are dealing with idioms. If you have more than one translation of the New Testament available, look up the verses and see how translators translated them. Below are a few examples of how different translators dealt with the first idiom – **eye be single**.

- (1) eye be **whole**
- (2) eye be **simple**
- (3) eye be **sound**
- (4) eye be **plain**
- (5) eye be **healthy**
- (6) eye be **sincere**
- (7) eye be **clear**
- (8) eye be **honest**
- (9) eye be **good**

Clearly the above choices do not present readers with a common meaning for the words of Jesus. His words are the most important words in the Bible for almost 2,000,000,000 Christians, many of which believe they are the word of God. How will they ever understand his words, if translators continue to produce work like this?

A good starting point and tool you can use to discover the meanings of Hebrew idioms is the Jewish Scriptures (Tanakh or Christian Old Testament). Below is a verse that contains the same idiom.

The Bible Through Their Eyes

He that has a good eye shall be blessed;
for he gives of his bread to the poor (Proverbs 22:9).

The verse is written in a Hebrew poetic form called a “parallelism,” which means “it contains two or more phrases that are directly related to, and modify each other; one phrase will unlock the meaning of the other.” The first part of the parallelism contains two parts which we will label as A & B:

(A) he that has a good eye
(B) shall be blessed.

The second part also contains one part that we will label C - he gives his bread to the poor. The ancient audience would understand that B relates to C, just as it did to A, in other words – “he that gives his bread to the poor [shall be blessed].”

The way to unlock the meaning of the idiom “good eye” is to compare it to the phrase that was used as a parallel to it, which in this case is C.

A = C
A (he that has a good eye) = C (he gives his bread to the poor)

He that has a good eye is the one who gives his bread to the poor. The idiom describes a person that helps the person in need, in this case he gives food to a hungry person. What would the ELOHIYM we read about in the first account do if He encountered a hungry person? He would protect life, preserve life and enhance the quality of life. How does one do this for a person in need of food? He provides food.

The Hebrew Scriptures will also allow us to unlock the meaning of the second idiom “evil eye.” This time we will turn to Deuteronomy 15:9:

"Beware that there be not a thought in your wicked heart, saying, `The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and you have an evil eye against your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry unto YAHWEH against you, and it be sin unto you."

In this case the phrase “you have an evil eye against your poor brother” is placed in parallel with “you give him nothing.” The person who has an evil eye is the person who gives his poor brother nothing. This person, unlike ELOHIYM, chose to not protect the life of the poor, preserve the life of the poor or enhance the quality of the life of the poor. Instead of acting like the ELOHIYM of the first Genesis account when he encounters one who is made in the image of ELOHIYM, a person with an evil eye acts like a wild animal (the serpent of the second account) and contributes to the loss of life of the person in need.

Interestingly, these idioms are still in use in Israel today. A friend of mine that has lived in Jerusalem for many years told me that beggars come up to him and say, “Good eye, good eye?” This means, “Please be generous to the poor and give me some help.” If you don’t help or ignore them you will probably be called, “An evil eye!” Now let’s reconstruct the original meaning of the words of Jesus using the actual meanings of the idioms:

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The light of the body is the eye:
therefore if you are **a generous person**, an almsgiver,
your whole body shall be full of light.
But if you are **a stingy person**, one who does not help the poor,
your whole body shall be full of darkness.

Euphemisms

A euphemism is the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant. A common American euphemism is - "I'm going to **powder my nose**." Just like with idioms you can't literally interpret euphemisms. You probably understand that this euphemism has nothing to do with powder or a nose.

One of the most dominant euphemisms in translations of the Bible is used for the name of God in the Tanakh and Old Testament. The Hebrew word is called the tetragrammaton because it consists of four Hebrew letters, which are transliterated as "YHVH." The ancient author wrote the name of the God – **YAHWEH**, but the translators wrote **LORD**. Notice that the word is written all with capital letters. The word is written three different ways in most translations – **LORD**, **Lord** and **lord**. I would wager that most readers fail to recognize these differences. To make matters even more confusing, sometimes they use **LORD** for other words than **YAHWEH**. In the New Testament they use Lord when it refers to Jesus, but I have witnessed many times when the person reading **Lord** viewed the word as if it was **LORD**.

One of the most important things you can do to elevate your Bible study to a much higher level, as well as view the words through the eyes of the ancient authors is to identify where the above euphemisms have been used in your Bible. You will be absolutely amazed at how just replacing the euphemism LORD with YAHWEH will transform your understanding of the words of your Bible.

A number of Jewish sects believe that using the tetragrammaton is a violation of the commandment of taking the name of God in vain. Therefore they have created a number of euphemisms to use instead. Below are some of the most popular.

- (1) **G-d**
- (2) **HaShem** (The Name)
- (3) **The Power**
- (4) **Heaven**
- (5) **The Holy One**
- (6) **The Most High**
- (7) **The Blessed One**
- (8) **Adonai**

The use of this type of euphemism is also found in the New Testament. One example is found in Mark 14:61 -- "Again the **High Priest** asked him, Are you the Christ, the Son of **the Blessed One**." In the open verse of Mark (1:1) the Gentile author wrote that Jesus was the "**Son of God**." The Gentile author used the word **God**, but the Jewish High Priest used the euphemism **the Blessed One**.

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We see the same thing in two other well known biblical phrases -- **Kingdom of Heaven** and **Kingdom of God**. Look at the two verses below.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the **kingdom of Heaven** (Matthew 5:3)

Blessed are you poor, for yours is the **kingdom of God** (Luke 6:20)

Many theological debates have taken place over the meanings of these two terms. In the above verses we find the two different terms because of the backgrounds of the authors. Luke is traditionally understood to be either a Gentile or a convert. His message was written to Gentiles; therefore he used the word **God**. Tradition indicates that Matthew was Jewish and his writings were addressed to Jewish readers, therefore, Matthew used the euphemism **Heaven**. If those involved in such arguments had been familiar with Hebrew euphemisms, they would have recognized that both mean the same thing. As I pointed out above, many Jews still use the same type of euphemisms today.

Finally, the presence of Hebrew idioms and euphemisms are very important clues for just how literal many of the words of the Synoptic Gospels have been preserved over the centuries. As you will later learn, different scribes over the years have edited the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts and changes have been made. However, the fact that embedded in those manuscripts are culturally correct writings.

Review of BHC Guidelines

- (1) The Bible is a book of words.
- (2) In order to accurately understand the words of a message you must learn how words work.
- (3) My belief system will be large enough to include all of the facts. It will be open enough to be tested. It will be flexible enough to change when I become aware of error or new facts.
- (4) Determine whether something is a belief or a fact.
- (5) Our Belief Systems strongly influence our perceptions and determine what we see and how we understand it.
- (6) NO single book is "THE BIBLE." Many books are called "THE BIBLE," but they are not identical. They may have different books and words. Even in the same books the words may differ.
- (7) A word is one or more symbols or sounds with an attached bundle of associations. The associations are a product of the Source's culture, historical time period, geographical location, and personal experiences.
- (8) The better you prepare yourself to look at the words of your Bible through the eyes of the ancient authors, the more accurately you will be able to understand what they originally meant.
- (9) The Source's meaning is the correct meaning and is the standard that must be used to test any translation or interpretation of the Source's words. Any belief or doctrine that bases its authority on words recorded in any Bible must first pass the test of being a Successful Communication Experience.

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- (10) We must determine what a word meant during the Source's historical time period because the meaning of a word may change over time.
- (11) The meanings of some words drop out of use and become unknown to later generations.
- (12) Get the facts about the Bible translation or translations you use.
- (13) Every language is laden with idioms and euphemisms.

Important points to remember.

- (1) Every culture has its unique idioms and euphemisms.
- (2) The failure of a translator to recognize the presence of the idioms and euphemisms from another culture cast doubts on how culturally accurate other words may have been translated.
- (3) Specialized resources must be used to identify and interpret idioms and euphemisms.

Comments & Notes