

WHY BIBLICAL LANGUAGES (HEBREW AND GREEK) MATTER FOR MINISTERS IN MYANMAR: EXPLORING THE TREASURE OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This article, first of all, tackles three common objections ministers encounter in Myanmar and provides three reasons for knowing biblical languages. First, this article argues that ministers in Myanmar should invest their time in studying Biblical languages because it helps us acquire a more intimate knowledge of God's Word for personal spiritual development. It also gives us the ability to critique the accuracy of translations, to dig out the most accurate meaning for ambiguous words, and to analyse theological debates arising from different interpretations of the Scripture. Second, knowing Biblical languages will help ministers to handle the Bible with confidence, explain it with accuracy, and proclaim it with power. Finally, this article mentions how knowing Biblical languages can help ministers to defend the gospel against false doctrine arising from misinterpretation.

Keywords: biblical languages, ministers, translation, misinterpretation, meaning, theology, accuracy, steward

Introduction

Does studying Biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) matter? If the answer is yes, how is this study helpful for those who are entrusted with the task of ministering the Word of God in Myanmar? There are many capable people in Myanmar who can easily tackle this issue, yet no one has written an article about it. These are questions with which I have wrestled for the past five years as a student of the Bible. The two questions above have led me to reflect on the benefits of learning the Biblical languages for pastors, ministers, evangelists, and church leaders in Myanmar.

Studying Biblical languages has never been prioritized, not in churches nor even in seminaries in Myanmar. A Myanmar pastor once mentioned that "Biblical languages are heavenly languages. It is therefore not necessary to know these languages while we are here on earth."¹ From this comment, we can see there is a misconception or misunderstanding about the importance of knowing

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¹ An anonymous AG pastor in Yangon.

Biblical languages. I wonder how many pastors or ministers in Myanmar are concerned about the need to study Biblical languages? Besides, many seminaries (if not most) today in Myanmar are choosing to discontinue these Biblical language courses in their M.Div. Programs.² According to a Program Evaluation Project (PEP) at Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (MEGST),³ Biblical languages were considered the least effective courses for their ministry. While there could be many hidden factors⁴ for the problems at hand, the root cause seems to arise from a lack of awareness of why studying these Biblical languages matters in ministering God's Word. Seminary students do not know how the knowledge of Biblical languages can be useful for them in the practical context of serving the Lord. This needs to be adequately addressed, so that the study of Biblical languages will reinvigorate those entrusted to the task of ministering the word of God. Therefore, this article explores the scriptural basis and reformers'⁵ opinions on the importance Biblical languages in equipping Biblical ministers to preach the Word in Myanmar.

Three Objections to studying Hebrew and Greek

Before we go any further, it is essential to look at some of the objections raised by ministers in Myanmar.⁶ Although there may be other reasons, this paper highlights three that are commonly mentioned in Myanmar.

Misconception

The first objection comes from a false notion that only a few gifted ministers can learn Biblical languages. If someone argues that preaching and teaching the word of God is only for the gifted, this limits church ministry to only a few talented people. Each person has their own gift(s) which may not require

² Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT), the biggest Christian Bible Institute in Myanmar, offers Biblical courses (Hebrew and Greek) as electives, not as compulsory courses. If other colleges include biblical languages, they are at an introductory level.

³ PEP surveyed how courses offered at MEGST are beneficial for the ministry of MEGST graduates.

⁴ For example, pastors, and ministers of the word of God in Myanmar are seldom encouraged to study biblical languages.

⁵ In order to make a subsequent argument, this paper contains quotations from reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin order to build on solid argument, which will have a lasting impact.

⁶ This paper employs the term "ministers" for pastors, evangelists, teachers, and missionaries.

them to know Biblical languages to build up the body of Christ. However, it is important to notice that to be a minister of God is to be a minister of His Word and learning Biblical languages is hard and demanding work. Regarding this, Enoch Okode points out that “Learning Biblical languages is a worthwhile long-term investment that requires diligence and discipline.”⁷ I admit that studying the original languages is not easy. However, we were not promised that our Christian life would be easy, but rather arduous and agonizing (Mt. 7:13-14; Lk13:24). Studying languages is a difficult task. There is no shortcut to learning Biblical languages, but it is still worth the time and effort. Mastery of Biblical languages is attainable not only by a few ministers who possess special language gifting but also for every minister who wants to diligently invest their energy in digging into the meaning of the Word of God. This, to me, is the true faithful minister of the word of God.

Lu Hmu Yay (လူမှုရေး) or Social Obligations

I have quite often heard ministers complain about how busy they are in the ministry. Some ministers claim that we have *lu hmu yay kate sa* (လူမှုရေးကိစ္စ), *a problem with social obligations*.⁸ Because of this, they cannot spare the time necessary for studying these languages. However, this should not be an excuse. Michael J. Kruger, the president of Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, rightly asserts that “the characterization of pastoral ministry as somehow incompatible with the languages (due to busyness, or other causes), is an unfortunate misunderstanding of what a pastorate is all about.”⁹ Pastors are indeed busy with hospital visitation, home visitation, sermon preparation, funerals, weddings, counseling, making phone calls, meeting with ministry leaders, and family matters. But, the primary task of a pastor’s call is to be a “minister of the

⁷ Enoch Okode, “A Case for Biblical Languages: Are Hebrew and Greek Optional or Indispensable?,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 29, no.2 (2010): 92, 91-106, accessed April 16, 2020, https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ajet/29-2_091.pdf

⁸ “*Lu Hmu Yay*” in Myanmar means “social affairs.” Specifically, “*Lu Hmu Yay*” can be divided into two parts: “*Thar Yay*” (pleasant duties) and “*Nar Yay*” (painful duties). While “*thar yay*” refers to events like weddings, thanksgiving, dedications, and birthday celebrations, “*Nar Yay*” includes funerals and hospital and home visitation.

⁹ Michael J. Kruger, “Is it a Waste of Time for Seminary Students (and Pastors) to Learn the Biblical Languages?,” Canon Fodder, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.michaeljkruger.com/html>.

Word.” If that is the case, being ministers of God’s Word certainly involves responsibilities such as studying, preaching, teaching, and counseling from the Word. In other words, pastors should devote themselves to serious study of the Bible in order to minister well. Regarding the importance of studying the Bible in its original languages, Okode rightly asserts, “If preachers don’t invest in Hebrew and Greek, their hearers will be deprived of some of the treasures of the Word as well as the informed and informative exposition that they deserve.”¹⁰ Even amid their busyness, pastors should attempt to spend time studying the Bible in its original language. Otherwise, a pastor who does not know how to use biblical languages will be like a doctor who does not know medical terms, an engineer who does not know math, or a software engineer who does not know a vital computer language. Let me further illustrate how knowing biblical languages can help pastors better in their ministry. Tin Aung Moe, who is an assistant Pastor at Insein Asho Chin Baptist Church, took foundational courses in Greek at MIT in 2016 and Hebrew at MEGST in 2017. When I asked him about the benefit of learning Biblical languages for his ministry, he said,

One of the main benefits of learning Biblical languages for me as a pastor is the confidence it gives me, which I preach in the pulpit. When I prepare my sermons, I try to read the text slowly in the original languages. When I read the Bible in its original languages, it enables me to pay closer attention to the text. As a result, it sheds light on my sermon preparation in such a way that I have never experienced before. But I must also admit that this is a bit challenging for a busy and aged pastor like me who has lost the language ability because it takes a lot of time for me to read the text in the original languages. Despite the challenges and limitations I have, after all, I consider this a great investment that helps me not only deepen my understandings of God’s Word but also think seriously about my role as a good shepherd who needs to guard, protect and feed his flock with the Word.¹¹

Here, we can see that a busy pastor like Tin Aung Moe found his study of biblical languages helpful in his ministry. Understandably, although the pastor may be

¹⁰ Enoch Okode, “A Case for Biblical Languages,” 92, 91-106.

¹¹ Tin Aung Moe, interviewed by author, Insein, Yangon, April 1, 2020.

very busy, the practical usefulness of biblical languages for pastors is especially evident when it comes to *lu hmu yay kate sa* (လူမှုရေးကိစ္စ). The fact of the matter is that pastors need to know the Bible as deeply and accurately as possible to counsel people effectively in *lu hmu yay kate sa* (လူမှုရေးကိစ္စ). Therefore, knowing biblical languages can help pastors, even more, to carry out their *lu hmu yay* responsibilities better.

The Advance of Technology

We live in an information technology age where we can easily access many resources like Bible dictionaries, commentaries, books, and software. During my four years of experience teaching Greek language at MEGST, I have observed that the students who quickly object to learning Greek do so because of the availability of abundant translations and Bible software.¹² A student once asked me, “why do we need to study Greek when there are so many good translations, commentaries, and other biblical tools like Bible Works and Logos?” Most of the major English translations of the Bible are excellent. Bible software like BibleWorks and Logos can quickly explain word meanings, parsing, word-frequency data, grammar, differences between translations, and offer commentaries. No one can deny that many advantages come through the availability of these resources. On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable argument to escape from learning biblical languages. When we go deeper, however, all is not as it appears. Hafemann interestingly argues the other way around, that “it is precisely because so many excellent commentaries are available today that the use of the biblical languages in preaching becomes more important, not less.”¹³ If we do not know biblical languages, we cannot evaluate whether a given translation is correct or not. All we can do is use a good commentary or Bible dictionary as a secondary source.

Moreover, although Bible software can give us the information we want quickly, it cannot explain the grammar of the text, syntax, chiasm, wordplay, logical flow, emphasis, and sentence structure. The main goal of learning biblical languages is

¹² This opposition actually comes from biblical students who have a high regard for the advancement of technology.

¹³ S. Hafemann, “Why Use Biblical Languages in Preaching?,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 (1999); 86-89.

to understand and interpret the text correctly, not just to know the meaning of the individual words or to be able to parse them. Therefore, the advanced technology does not diminish the importance of studying the languages because it cannot substitute for the work of careful interpretation. Having grappled with three objections ministers embrace, the next section will look at how knowing biblical languages can help ministers be better servants of God in the ministry.

The Importance of Employing Biblical Languages

In his book on Greek grammar, A.T. Robertson cited A.M. Fairbairn's statement when he points out the importance of studying biblical languages, "No man can be a theologian who is not a philologist. He who is no grammarian is no divine."¹⁴ In other words, both of these scholars assume that learning and knowing Greek and Hebrew is unquestionably essential for all who study the Scripture. Unfortunately, many theological students, pastors, and ministers in Myanmar do not see the need to study or use the biblical languages in their ministry. This section puts forward three reasons why ministers in Myanmar should invest their time in studying bible languages.

Spiritual Formation

Studying the Bible is one of the most important elements of our spiritual growth. Our Christian life cannot be separated from reading and studying the Bible. The primary goal of studying the Bible is to have more intimacy with God so that we can be fully shaped in His image. To accomplish the task of spiritual formation, biblical languages play an important role in understanding His Word clearly and accurately because knowing the original languages leads us to a fuller understanding of the voice of the Bible. Here, one thing we need to keep in mind is that we are not just studying languages but the Word of God itself. DeRouchie states, "If the Word is the means to knowing God and living for him and if the Biblical languages are the very means by which God communicated his Word,

¹⁴ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 3rd ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), x.

then knowing Hebrew and Greek can directly serve one's desire for God and display of God in daily life."¹⁵ Similarly, Machen argues,

If you are to tell what the Bible does say, you must be able to read the Bible for yourself. And you cannot read the Bible for yourself unless you know the languages in which it was written. . . . In his mysterious wisdom [God] gave [his Word] to us in Hebrew and in Greek. Hence if we want to know the Scriptures, to the study of Greek and Hebrew we must go.¹⁶

Reading God's word in its original languages will indeed increase our desire to study more. When our desire to explore God's Word increases, we want to know more of His Word and more of Him, which cannot be accomplished by anything other than studying the Word in its original language. The next section will present how knowing biblical languages will help us in our evaluation of translation, meaning, and theology.

Translation

When we study the Word of God, we have to remember that God sovereignly chose to describe His will through the Bible, written in Hebrew and Greek (and a small amount of Aramaic). Martin Luther asserts, "The languages, therefore, that God did not despise but chose above all others for His Word, we too ought to honor above all others."¹⁷ Here, I agree with Luther that if these are the languages God chose to express His will, we should attempt to study what He has to say in those languages.

Today, the Bible has been translated into many languages from Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. In Myanmar, we also have the Bible in our vernacular

¹⁵ Jason S. DeRouchie, "The Profit of Employing the Biblical Languages: Scriptural and Historical Reflections," *Themelios* 37.1 (2012): 43-44, 32-50, accessed, April 16, 2020, <https://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-profit-of-employing-the-biblical-languages-scriptural-and-historical-re/>.

¹⁶ J. Gresham Machen, "Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writers*, ed. D. G. Hart; Phillipsburg (NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 188-89.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," in *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 4, trans. A.T. W. Steinhäuser (Albany, USA: AGES Software, 1997), 85.

languages such as those of the tribal groups of Chin, Karen, and Kachin states. Although we have many good translations of the Bible, the difficulty is which versions are we going to use? The NASB? The NIV? The ESV? The NLT? How can we justify which translation is the closest to the original text? In this sense, I am not undermining the works of translators who have spent their precious time, energy, and resources. Instead, I do appreciate their hard work in attempting to convey the closest meaning from the original languages. However, we also need to be aware that no translation can fully grasp all nuances of the original words of the Bible. For example, the diversity of translations of 1 Cor. 7:36 can be seen in the following table.

Greek (NA 28)	KJV	NASB	NIV, NET	NRSV
<p>ὅτι τις ἀσχημονεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ νομίσει,</p>	<p>But if any man thinks that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin ...</p>	<p>But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter...</p>	<p>If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin, he is engaged to...</p>	<p>If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée...</p>
<p>The Judson Bible</p>	<p>Myanmar Standard Bible</p>	<p>Myanmar Catholic Bible</p>	<p>Myanmar Common Language Bible</p>	
<p>အပျိုကညာသည် (virgin) ခင်ပွန်းမရှိဘဲ အသက်အရွယ်လွန်လျှင် မလျှောက်ပတ်ဟု ထိုအပျိုကညာ (virgin) ကို ပိုင်သောသူသည်...</p>	<p>တစ်စုံတစ်ယောက်သည် မိမိနှင့်ဆိုင်သော အပျိုကညာ (virgin) ကို အခါလင့်စေလျှင်...</p>	<p>အကယ်၍ တစ်ဦးတစ်ယောက်က မိမိသည် မိမိနှင့် စေ့စပ်ထားသူ (fiancée) အပေါ်၌...</p>	<p>စေ့စပ် လမ်းကြောင်းပြီး နောက် (after engagement)... အမျိုးသားသည် အမျိုးသမီး (woman) အပေါ် တွင်....</p>	

Although there are no significant differences among the KJV, NIV, NET, and NRS translations, the main difference comes between NASB and the others. While NASB translates *παρθενον* as “virgin” daughter, the rest render it as “virgin” fiancée. The same is true for Burmese translations. While JB and MSB prefer to translate *παρθενον* as “virgin,” MCB chooses “fiancée.” Differing from JB, MSB, and MCB, MCLB renders it as “woman.” Now the questions set before us are: which translations we are going to use and on what basis we are going to justify these significant differences. It is, therefore, evident that these questions are unanswerable without the knowledge of biblical languages.

Moreover, the limitations of a translation into English or our vernacular languages becomes more apparent when it comes to “wordplay” in the original languages of the Bible. As Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart point out, “Wordplays tend to abound in most languages, but they are always unique to the original language and can almost never be ‘translated’ into a receptor language.”¹ We can indeed find a good number of places where there is a play on words in the original languages of the Bible, but they are difficult to express in translations. For instance, the story of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) illustrates the wordplay that can be found in Hebrew but is lost in translation. Wordplay exists between the Hebrew word “bricks” - לְבִנְיָהּ (lbnym, 11:3b) and the Hebrew verb “let’s confuse” - וְנִבְלָהֶם (nblh, 11:7). There is an interesting wordplay on the consonants b, l, and n. We can see that the consonants of brick (lbn) are altered in the cohortative form “let’s confuse” (nblh). The root *nbl* in Hebrew, although not mentioned in this passage, means “fool.”² Therefore, it is likely that for Hebrew readers, the Hebrew word “folly” (nebalah) would come to mind. Although people are making bricks to build a tower, God is turning their bricks into confusion. As a result, their plan is unsuccessful. If this is the case, the wordplay between *lbn* and *nbl* beautifully highlights “the human folly of those who think they can assume God’s prerogatives for themselves.”³ Therefore, the wordplay in this passage in Hebrew is not obvious in English. Regarding the usefulness of knowing wordplay in its original languages, Randy McCracken mentions in his blog

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 46-47.

² Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 95-96.

³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 130-131.

post that “knowing wordplay in the original languages of the Bible not only enhances our appreciation for its artistry, more importantly, but it also helps us to connect with the theology and messages in the Biblical text that we might otherwise overlook.”⁴ However, it is easy to miss wordplay and the message behind it when there is a lack of knowledge of Biblical languages.

Meaning

Language conveys the meaning of the writers or speakers. The same is true for Biblical writers. When they write Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, there is a message they want to convey to their audience. How then can we rightly grasp the message of Biblical authors? According to John Calvin, attempting to grasp the meaning of scripture without the original languages fully is “to make all revere a Scripture hidden in darkness like the mysteries of Ceres, and let none presume to aspire to the understanding of it.”⁵ No translation can convey one hundred percent the meaning of the original text. For example, the word for “futility” or “vanity” in Greek is *ματαιότητι*, which has various meanings, depending on the context in which it is used.⁶ In Romans 8:20, it refers to creation as being in a state of frustration resulted from failing to attain the purpose for which it was made.⁷ The following table shows how the Greek word *ματαιότητι* is rendered in different translations, including Burmese translations

⁴ Randy McCracken, “Wordplay in the Old Testament?,” Bible Study with Randy, accessed April 16, 2020, <http://www.biblestudywithrandy.com/2015/11/wordplay-in-the-old-testament/>.

⁵ John Calvin, “Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote,” in *Tracts and Letters*, vol. 3, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1983), 75.

⁶ Danker, Frederick William, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 620-621.

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on The New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 537.

Greek (NA 28)	KJV	NASB, NRSV, NET	NIV	NLT
τῆ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἧ κτίσις ὑπετάγη...	For the creature was made subject to vanity ...	For the creation was subjected to futility ...	For the creation was subjected to frustration ...	all creation was subjected to God’s curse ...

The Judson Bible	Myanmar Standard Bible	Myanmar Catholic Bible	Myanmar Common Language Bible	
ဤလောကသည် အနိစ္စနိုင်ငံသို့ (country of impermanence) အလိုလိုလိုက်သည် မဟုတ်။	ဖန်းဆင်ခံလောကသည် အချည်းနှီး (futility) အဖြစ် သို့ ချထားခြင်း ခံရသည်မှာ...	ဘုရားသခင်သည် ထိုအဖန်ဆင်းခံ လောကကို အနတ္တ (non-existence of the self) ဖြစ်စေရန်...	ဖန်းဆင်ခံကမ္ဘာကြီးသည် အနတ္တ (non-existence of the self) ဖြစ်ရန် စီရင်ခြင်း ခံခဲ့ရ၏။	

From the above table, we see how the word “ματαιότητι” (futility) is translated differently. Judson translated “ματαιότητι” as အနိစ္စနိုင်ငံ (“country of impermanence”) which is a combination of two words: အနိစ္စ (impermanence) and နိုင်ငံ (country). The way Judson render it in Burmese differs from the original Greek word “ματαιότητι.” The word “futility” or “vanity” in Burmese is အချဉ်းနိုး. In Burmese, there is a slight difference in meaning between the word “အချဉ်းနိုး” (futility or vanity) and “အနိစ္စနိုင်ငံ” (country of impermanence). On the one hand, I appreciate Judson’s rendering of “အနိစ္စနိုင်ငံ” because it is not only more natural in Burmese but also easy for Burmese readers to understand. However, the real meaning of “ματαιότητι” is not adequately conveyed in the Judson Bible. How much more will indigenous translations, which are dependent on Judson’s Burmese translation, alter the meaning? An Italian proverb aptly says, “Traduttore traditore” meaning “translators are traitors!¹ or “translations are treacherous.”² This does not imply that translators are being deliberately deceptive, but rather expresses the impossibility of fully translating meaning from one language to another. There is no perfect translation nor translator. Any translator has their own biases, which unavoidably create a difference in meaning. Therefore, reading the biblical text in the original language helps us to increase our ability to be precise in meaning. However, we have to keep in mind that knowing the biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek, does not in itself miraculously make someone expert in understanding the message of the Bible. Instead, the ability to study the Bible in its original language will increase our confidence in reading His Word with accuracy and authority, which can never be acquired through translations. This, in turn will enable us to preach and to teach others about God with greater certainty and precision.

Theology

The most important reason for studying biblical language is its usefulness in doing theology. Our theology needs to be deeply rooted in the Bible. Otherwise, it will lead us into doctrinal error, as happens when theology is imposed on the text. Unfortunately, this problem of “theologizing” the text is common today in

¹ Moises Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 134.

² Bruce. K. Waltke, “How I Changed My Mind About Teaching Hebrew (or Retained It)” *Cruz* 29:4 (1993); 10-15.

Myanmar. For instance, three years ago, an extremist Christian group called “New Heaven” was in the news. The group trains people for three months in Kyonpyaw, located in Irrawaddy division. Their primary teaching is that “we do not need earthly parents because God is our best parent.” Because of this teaching, students do not go home after their training. Their parents are in agony because of this false teaching. This news spread rapidly throughout the whole country through social media such as Facebook. As a result, the group is accused of forcing Buddhists to convert to Christianity, which is illegal and is under scrutiny by local Buddhist authorities.³ Even worse, Christianity as a whole is discredited as an extremist religion. This creates many problems in our relationships and sharing the gospel with Buddhists. The root cause of this problem is a misreading of Luke 14:25-27 where it says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple.” They read and apply it literally. In other words, they theologize the text without paying attention to the context. As a result, it leads them into wrong theology.

Another theological difference resulting from different interpretations of a text is the ongoing debate regarding the Old and New Perspective in Pauline studies⁴ as in the interpretation of Paul’s usage of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ⁵ (“faith of Jesus Christ” or “faithfulness of Jesus Christ”; Rom. 3:22,26; Gal. 2:16; 3:22). Here, the interpretive problem is whether πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ means “faith in Jesus Christ” or “the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” Is Paul using the expression πίστεως

³ “Authorities Suing an Alleged Christian Cult in Kyonpyaw,” BBC Burmese, accessed November 15, 2019, <http://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma-41947782>; See also, DVBTv News <https://www.facebook.com/DVBTvNews/videos/1526997374059926/>.

⁴ The “New Perspective on Paul” is a major challenge to the Reformers’ understanding of “Justification by faith.” The term “new perspective” was coined by J.D.G. Dunn in 1982 to describe the new approach to Paul’s theology, See, *Colin G. Kruse, Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2012) 14. Well-known leaders of the new perspective are N.T. Wright and James D.G. Dunn. Their works on NPP build on the research of E.P. Sanders. In brief, **NPP** is a non-traditional way of interpreting Paul’s **New Testament** teaching on **justification by faith as main Paul’s theology. Basically, the main idea of NPP is that Judaism was not a legalistic religion that required works for salvation.** Instead, keeping the works of the law is to *show that* they were God’s covenant people and not to earn their salvation. See, E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 75.

⁵ While most translations like the ESV, KJV, NAS, NIV, and NRS prefer to take it as “faith in Jesus Christ,” the NET takes it as “faithfulness of Jesus Christ.”

Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as an objective genitive or a subjective genitive? ⁶ The Old Perspective (especially the Reformers), interpret it as “our faith in Jesus Christ” (objective genitive). Therefore, the Reformers claim *sola fide*, meaning that salvation only comes through our faith in Christ. On the other hand, the New Perspective takes it as “the faithfulness of Jesus” (Subjective Genitive). They assert that we are regarded as God’s covenant people through the faithful, obedient work of Jesus on the Cross. Here, we can see the different theological positions between the Old and New Perspective scholars concerning πίστειος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Again, the point I want to make here is that knowing biblical languages not only helps us to follow the argument of theological differences derived from different interpretation of the text but also to evaluate which theology is justified.

Pragmatic Reason (Teaching and Preaching)

The main reason for studying biblical languages is to apply it, especially in our preaching and teaching ministry. Preaching and teaching the Word makes studying biblical languages essential because these ministries are fundamentally centered on the Word. In 2 Tim 2:15, Paul exhorts everyone who is called to the task of preaching and teaching to handle God’s word rightly. If we are to deal with God’s Word correctly, especially in our preaching and teaching, then we need to be as correct as possible. Reading the Word in its original languages is the best way to be as accurate as possible with the Scripture. Writing about the difference between preachers or teachers of Scripture who do not know the languages and someone who does know them, Luther said,

For the preacher or teacher may expound the Bible from beginning to end after his own fashion, hit or miss, if there is no one present to judge whether his teaching be right or wrong. But in order to judge, men must know the languages, otherwise it is impossible. Therefore, though the faith and the Gospel may be proclaimed by simple preachers without the languages, such preaching is flat and tame, men grow at last wearied and disgusted and it falls to the ground. But when the preacher is versed in the languages, his discourse has freshness and force, the whole of

⁶ In Greek, there are many usages of the Genitive case. For further information, see, Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 113-116.

Scripture is treated, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and works.⁷

According to Luther, we need to study the biblical languages because they give power to our message, depth to our argument, confidence before our audience and “freshness and force” to our preaching. He opined that those who preached without the languages were limited, and these limitations would ultimately show up in their preaching. The same is true for teaching the Word. Luther went on to say, “to interpret Scripture, to treat it independently, and to dispute with those who cite it incorrectly ... cannot be done without languages.” Let me substantiate this point with an example. We hear a common mistake from many preachers and teachers in Myanmar based on their understanding of the word ἀγάπε (“love”) in John 3:16. They regard ἀγάπε as “divine love and sacrificial love,” which is only possible with God while φιλία is brother love which is only found in human beings. This is a false assertion derived from an untrue reading of the Greek New Testament. Even if we look at the same context in John 3:19, “...ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς...” (people loved the darkness rather than the light), the same word ἀγαπάω is used to describe the nature of human beings. There are also some places where ἀγάπε (*agape*) and φιλία (*philia*) are used interchangeably to describe both divine love and brotherly love.⁸ The point here is that preachers or teachers of God’s Word should engage firsthand with the original languages instead of depending on the opinion of others, opinions which might be inaccurate. Therefore, knowing biblical languages helps us to handle the Word with confidence, explain it with accuracy, and proclaim it with power.

However, we need to be careful not to insist that God cannot use someone as a pastor if he or she does not know biblical languages. Can teachers or preachers proclaim God’s Word without knowing biblical languages? My immediate answer is “yes,” and I have seen many good preachers who have never studied the biblical languages at all. Again, I am not arguing that we should expect pastors and Bible teachers to become experts in the biblical languages. But if their task involves vocational ministry like training other pastors, they should attempt to learn biblical languages within the time and opportunities they have. As a result, they can be better

⁷ Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” 89.

⁸ See Lk 11:43; Jn 3:19; 5:20; 16:27, etc; See, Enoch Okode, 103.

preachers or teachers. They would be able to make accurate decisions about which translation is correct. They would be able to weigh the judgments of commentators instead of merely relying on them. If we want to study scripture seriously, then the more of the original languages we know, the better off we are. Studying the languages will prepare ministers to fulfil their ministerial calling well.

Apologetic Reason

Having so far discussed the importance of studying God’s word in its original language for our spiritual growth and the application of God’s Word in our teaching and preaching ministry, this section will articulate how biblical languages can help us in our defense of God’s Word. 1 Peter 3:15 instructs us to always be ready to make a defense for our hope. Many false doctrines are taught in the mainstream Christian churches today. A similar problem existed in Luther’s day. He provides a lengthy argument for the importance of knowing Biblical languages.

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 we carry this jewel; they are the vessel in which we hold this wine; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and as the Gospel itself says, they are the baskets in which we bear these loaves and fishes and fragments.⁹

According to Luther, if we do not pay close attention to the text, we will lose the gospel itself. As a result, we will inevitably impose on the gospel our image according to our own preferences and desires. In the same context, Luther further mentions that “For though the Gospel has come and daily comes through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it has come by means of the languages, by which it was also spread abroad, and by which it must be preserved”¹⁰ Indeed, for Luther, knowledge of biblical languages will safeguard proper preservation of the gospel. More specifically, it is more difficult to refute false teachings against the gospel without the knowledge of biblical languages. Let me illustrate this with the Jehovah Witness’s interpretation of John 1:1c. They interpret “...ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος (the word was with the God and God was the Word) as “the Word was a god.” Due to the lack of definite article before the noun θεὸς (*theos*),

⁹ Martin Luther, 85.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, 84.

according to Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus Christ is not like Jehovah, the only true God. He is rather a lesser divine being, 'a god'. They deny the deity of Jesus. This interpretation leads to Christian polytheism.¹¹ According to Enoch Okode, "[Jehovah's Witnesses] fail to recognize that the lack of definite article does not mean that the Word is one god out of many other gods."¹² In this construction, the noun which lacks an article does not lose its definiteness.¹³ Wallace takes the usage of θεός (*theos*) as qualitative¹⁴ and he explains that "The idea of qualitative θεός here is that the Word had all these attributes and qualities that 'the God' (of 1:1b) had. In other words, he shared the essence of the Father, though they differed in person." This explanation beautifully defends the deity of Jesus. Interpretation such as this is impossible without the knowledge of biblical languages.

In short, there is no need for a person to know Greek or Hebrew to be saved and become a part of the Church. But knowledge of these languages can shed light on the ambiguity that sometimes unavoidably occurs between translations and make one able to defend the gospel from wrong teaching arises from a wrong interpretation of the text. Therefore, knowing biblical languages will help us to be more effective stewards of the gospel with which God has entrusted us.

Conclusion

Why do biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) matter for ministers in Myanmar? In this paper, I have provided three primary cases for learning biblical languages for ministers in Myanmar. First, I have argued that the most important reason for studying biblical languages is its usefulness in understanding the Word of God more deeply for our personal spiritual development. Reading the Bible in its original language will not only help us to determine whether a Bible translation is an accurate one but also to see things in biblical languages that we cannot see in bible translations. Moreover, it helps uncover the real meaning of some of the text, and

¹¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics*, 266.

¹² Enoch Okode, 99-100.

¹³ According to Granville Sharp's Rule, "In Greek, when two nouns are connected by και and the article precedes only the first noun, there is a close connection between the two. That connection always indicates at least some sort of unity. At a higher level, it may connote equality. At the highest level, it may indicate identity." For further information, See, Daniel B. Wallace, 270-73.

¹⁴ Here, the usage of "qualitative" noun in Greek Grammar "stresses quality, nature, or essence. It does not merely indicate membership in a class of which there are other members (such as an indefinite noun), nor does it stress individual identity (such as a definite noun)." See, Daniel B. Wallace, 244.

this then leads to sound theology, which is rooted in the Bible. Second, I have mentioned that the ability to read biblical languages will increase our confidence in preaching and teaching the word as if we were spoken to by God directly with inspiration and accuracy, which can never be obtained through Bible translations. In this way, we will become better preachers and teachers of God's Word. Finally, I have asserted that knowing the biblical languages will help us to guard the gospel against wrong teachings. As a result, we will become more effective stewards of the gospel with which God has entrusted us.

To conclude, the Word of God truly comes to life when we, ministers of God's Word, study it in its original languages. We, therefore, should make an effort to learn the biblical languages. Perhaps this is a good analogy: reading the Bible without knowing Biblical languages is like "kissing one's bride through the veil."¹⁵ For ministers in Myanmar, the question is now reversed: Why *not* attempt to study biblical languages?

¹⁵ The author is unknown, and this saying is popular in the case for the importance of knowing biblical languages.