Idioms are used in any language. An idiom is figurative, not a literal rendition of a text or word. It becomes an idiom by regular use by many people, a ‘collocation’. Usually, an idiom therefore changes the literal meaning of a word, and yet has a special meaning. That is, an idiomatic word or phrase is not the same as the literal word or phrase. And, because idioms are peculiar to particular places or languages, one cannot appreciate what they mean unless they understand what users of the language really mean by them. This is why learning Hebrew is difficult if idioms are not taken into account.

In English, for example, the word ‘euphoric’ might be expressed as the idiom ‘high as a kite’. Or, the word ‘rebellious’ might use the idiomatic expression, ‘going off the rails’. Such expressions are common to the British people, who know what they mean. But, to foreigners, the phrases are incomprehensible.

There are Hebrew idioms, too, and if they are not known, even to a Hebrew learner, then certain phrases will not be understood and, as a consequence, neither will be the actual word they describe.

There are other Hebraistic word usages and customs that can trip-up the reader of scripture. Below I give three examples of Hebrew structures that can cause poor rendition of a text, and which Higher Critics ignore in order to insist on what they see as ‘repetition’.

**Paratactic Sentence Structure**

These use the connective ‘and’ to join lower-level ideas or ideas that are dependent on one another. We see this regularly in, say, the letters of Paul, where he might begin a new verse (verses being the way English translators ordered information) with ‘and’. Frowned upon by grammar teachers today, but very useful! The ‘and’ can be used instead of, or to convey the meaning of, ‘in order that’, or ‘then’, ‘that is to say’, etc.

Because Hebrew writers often join two complete sentences with ‘and’, Higher Critics tend to say this ‘proves’ repetition. This, however, is to miss the point of the structure! In reality, the sentence after the ‘and’ is another way of putting what was said in the first sentence. That is, the second part explains the first part in another way – the action of a teacher. It is not idle repetition at all.
Look at Genesis 1 for example - one of my favourites! The first verse gives a heading or summary of what is to follow. Verse 2 begins with ‘and’, which merely introduces what comes next – a filling-out of the details. Because most commentaries and definitions tend to run the phrase ‘and the earth’ together, the real significance of ‘and’ is not seen. Same goes for ‘and void; and darkness’ which only serve to explain the first verse in more detail. Chapter one is a series of verses connected by ‘and’, each proceeding verse explains the latter. However, perhaps the use by Paul is easier to see in action, though the Old Testament is replete with these structures.

Repetition for Emphasis

Any good teacher will repeat what he says, if the matter he is dealing with is important. Old Testament scholar, O T Allis, says: “The Bible is a very emphatic book. Its aim is to impress upon the hearer or reader the great importance of the themes of which it treats. The most natural way of securing emphasis in a narrative is by amplification or reiteration. Consequently, the Biblical style is often decidedly diffuse and characterised by elaborateness of detail and repetition.”

So, when you come across texts that are repeated, it is not because some later writer decided to add bits together from different sources! And, often, the repeated text gives a slightly different 'slant' on the same information given previously. The ten plagues in Exodus are repeated in a variety of ways, not because a writer forgot he had already said it, but because the information is so important it had to be underlined, so to speak.

In my own books on the environmentalism, for example, some have said I have 'repeated' myself as if it were unintended or simply forgetfulness. The real reason is that I wanted to impress the importance of certain facts on the reader, so I used slightly varying ways to present them. And when I teach verbally, I often repeat the same themes, if not the same words. There are, then, no unintended repetitions in scripture, only a misunderstanding of Hebraisms.

Poetic Parallelism

This is the use of paired clauses, common throughout scripture. It is when two sentences or phrases are used together to describe the same truth. For example, if I said in sentence one: ‘My work is a testimony to the Lord’ and followed it with ‘The Lord deserves the correctness of what I say’, I am using Poetic Parallelism. Not very good as poetry, but it says what I mean to say. In the same way Psalm 19, verse 7 contains another example of this paired text: “The law
of Jehovah is perfect, restoring the soul. The testimony of Jehovah is sure, making wise the simple.”

There are other examples of Hebraisms. For example, when I was teaching on Isaiah, I was delighted to find that the entire book is written in parallels, where each text speak to us in both physical or literal ways and also in spiritual ways, at the same time. Only God could have done this, because no man could continually parallel every text throughout a long book! I suppose we could refer to this as ‘dual parallelism’, though a definition is not really needed.

I set out to show the reader that certain structures are used in scripture, and ignorance of them (or their abuse) will lead to very bad teaching or understanding. Obviously, what I have said can be set out in a far more complex and comprehensive manner. Hopefully, though, my overall point has been made. There are many more Hebraisms! Looking at a Strong’s entry alone will not provide the answers!

© August 2009

---oOo---

{loadposition btm_address}