

Greek Confusion

by Peter John Schrock

Koina Greek often appears to many as a mystical key to understanding the deep truths found in scripture, yet it is really just another language that happened to be spoke about two thousand years ago when the Bible was written. Koina simply means “common” and so we see that most scholars today merely see that the language of the bible as the common language of the people at that time. Yet today, people have elevated the Greek language and Greek words above a practical level. They have followed the practice of all who value things that they don’t understand or don’t know very much about. Just as people in the past mystified many things that we would laugh at today, so also many times the way Greek is treated, with regard to the Bible, can often become quite ridiculous. Nevertheless, Greek is important when it comes to the interpretation of the scriptures because every version of the New Testament is ultimately derived out of this language, but it still must be treated as what it is, a language which people spoke. Koina Greek was a spoken language similar to the languages that people speak today and should be used and interpreted the same way.

Spoken languages often have words in them that are made of compound words that when it comes to their usage, have nothing to do with the individual words that they are composed of. An example of this in the English language is the word breakfast. If we separate the two words we have “break” and “fast”. So one could conclude that this word is supposed to mean: a meal, in which someone that hasn’t eaten for a while, begins to eat again. Now this sounds pretty good until someone starts applying it practically. For instance, a restaurant named Denny’s advertises that they serve breakfast all day long. Using our derived definition, one might come to the conclusion that if they have stopped eating at any point in the day, they can always go to Denny’s and start eating again. It even makes perfect sense because Denny’s actually is open twenty four hours a day, yet any English speaker knows that deriving such conclusion based on Denny’s advertisement would be absolutely absurd. The

Denny’s advertisement is not talking about how late their restaurants are open. It is talking about pancakes, waffles, eggs, toast, omelets, and etc. Though initially it seems that our definition was drawing a deeper meaning into the Denny’s advertisement by looking at the composition of its words, it was actually leading us away from the intended meaning of the advertiser. The point is that simply breaking apart compound words does not necessarily help in the interpretation of spoken languages and can even cause listeners to draw false conclusions.

Greek, like other spoken languages can also be misinterpreted if one assumes breaking apart compound words will always grant deeper meaning into the author’s intent. The method of breaking apart compound words is very common practice for people seeking a better understanding of a Greek word used in the New Testament because a large portion of the Greek language is built on compound words. This method often yields a lot of help gaining understanding exactly what the speaker is saying, but this is not always the case. An example of this would be the word *σομφερω* (soomphero). When you break it apart you have the Greek words “soon” and “phero”. “Soon” is a preposition meaning “with” and “phero” is a verb meaning “to bear.” But, if we were to interpret this word to mean “bear with” then most scripture where it is used would make little sense and we would even draw different conclusions than what the authors intended to mean. 2 Corinthians 12:7 would end up saying something like, “the manifestation of the spirit is given for the common bearing.” This could mean that the spirit is given so that we will be able to bear with each other or maybe it could also mean that the spirit is given for the purpose so that together we can a display the spirit of God. Either of which could make sense. Nevertheless, this is obviously not what the author is saying. By looking at simple definition or by looking elsewhere in the New Testament we find that soomphero really means “to be profitable” or “advantageous.” Which in turn make 2 Corinthians 12:7 say, “the manifestation of the spirit is

given for the profit of all.” Though there are times where breaking apart words can reveal greater meaning, sloppy interpretation leads to bad understanding.

Breaking apart compound words in order to find deeper meaning in the text of the New Testament is not bad, but it must be done properly. Looking at the composition of compound words is useful to find out how the word gets its meaning and sometimes it might require some research or clever thinking. For example, *soomphero* gets its meaning from the concept of “bearing with.” If two people bear a load together they can get more done, hence it is more “profitable” or “advantageous” to have others to help bear your burdens than to bear them by yourself. The word breakfast is similar. Its meaning starts with composition of its words “break” and “fast.” Most people go to bed at night and stop eating. Then in the morning they get up and start eating again. They “break their fast” that they took while they slept during the night. So breakfast is often interpreted as a meal eaten in the morning. Yet it can also be interpreted as the type of food that is typically eaten in the morning. Now with both of these example the direct composition of the words do not display there meaning and so if someone wants to get a better understanding of their meaning they must look beyond definitions of the word’s compositions. Once the meaning is clearly seen all that really matters is the meaning itself and not where the meaning comes from because origin of the word meaning probably doesn’t have anything to do with what the author is trying to communicate. For instance, if someone is telling you that Denny’s serves breakfast all day long, they are only concerned about communicating what kind of food you can get at the restaurant. Likewise when an author of the New Testament is writing a letter it usually should be read simply and freely based upon the logical meaning of the words. People looking for a more profound meaning in the words of the New Testament

need to be cautious so as not to get too deeply caught up in the words themselves that they end up adding more to the text than the author had originally intended.

Despite the fact that at times people can get caught up in the language itself, greater meaning and interesting twists can often be derived from looking at the structure of words. In the New Testament compound words often seem to paint pictures which describe their meaning. This takes place with the word *παρὰβασις* (*parabasis*) which means transgression or a breaking of the law. It comes from *para* meaning “along side” and *basis* meaning “a stepping or a walking”. The composition of the word itself actually paints the picture of one who steps to the side of what God has commanded. In other places in the New Testament there are words that though their composition does not play directly into their meaning itself, it must have seemed to have been a play-on-words for the Greek speakers. This probably occurred with the word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) which simply means gathering or assembly. It got its meaning from citizens being called out from their homes into some public place for the purpose of gathering together. The word is made up of *ek* meaning “out of” and *kaleo* meaning “to call”. Though the meaning itself is focused on gathering together and not being “called out”, it certainly must have had some significance to the Greek speaking Christians who were “called out” of the world to live a holy life for Christ.

Great significance can be wrapped up in the Greek words composing the New Testament, but when people treat the Greek language like a ridged systematic science and not like a common language the authors meaning can often be lost or distorted. By considering some of the similarities in Greek and English it is easy to see that reading too much into individual words can be dangerous. So let us approach God’s word with diligence, fear, and trembling lest we end up writing Revelation chapter 23.