

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK
THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS:
WHY THEY WROTE HOW THEY WROTE
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground. Walt Whitman

In the year 1609 Johannes Kepler published *Astronomia Nova*, the book that established the mathematical principles of modern astronomy. His astronomy teacher Michael Maestlin reprimanded him for bringing physics into astronomy but this is considered by some to be Kepler's defining addition to this science. The traditional circular planetary orbits were updated to elliptical orbits delineated in Kepler's *First Law of Planetary Motion*.¹

As the promising search to find earthlike planets, dubbed The Kepler Mission, managed by NASA intensifies, the important quest by theologians to understand NT writers has also intensified. Planet Earth is special, and so is God's revelation to this planet's inhabitants through these writers. Their tenor is exceptional; in the variegated texts reside decipherable combinations of distilled ancient tradition and effusive contemporary linguistic influences of their era. Every iota and tittle has been examined and re-examined meticulously by scholars and waves of linguistic studies have unearthed much in the last half century. Nonetheless, there still remain dimensions hitherto untouched.

This volume acknowledges previous work and seeks to connect the thoughts gleaned from them to seminal ideas that have their locus in the inquiry of how language can influence thought and vice-versa. The relationship between language and cognition is empirical to the study of Jewish and Greek scripture. In the Jewish text of the book of *Genesis*, God confounded

¹ Dava Sobel, *Discover Magazine: Science Technology and the Future*, November 2008, ed. Patrice Adcroft (New York, NY: William Hostetter, 2008), 22.

men at the “Tower of Babel”: “Come, let us go down and confuse their language שָׁפַח so they will not understand each other (Gen. 11:7).” Conversely, in the Greek text of scripture, on the day of Pentecost, God’s spirit moved upon the disciples and they began to speak in tongues γλῶσσα so that the diaspora Jews and others of diverse languages could hear the Gospel in their tongue (Acts 2:7).

Language is more than just a means of communication. It is not unreasonable to state that language is man’s primary tool of thought and perception. It may influence culture and determine expression. Two anthropologists of the early twentieth century, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, argued that language is more than simply attaching labels to the “real world.” The Sapir-Whorf thesis holds that people perceive the world through the cultural lens of language.

Καὶ Ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ Ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ Ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ Πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ Ἀληθείας (John 1:14).² This verse of scripture here appearing in what is thought to have been close to its first written form or possibly a translation of an earlier linguistic form, demonstrates the intimacy between writer and subject. This New Testament writer was impacted by the glory of the incarnated “Word”, Jesus Christ. His thoughts were expressed in the unifying language of the times, the Koine Greek, which translated into modern English becomes, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth”(NIV).

² Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart, Germany: United Bible Societies, 1993), 313.

The style of NT writers is generally argumentative. In his description of rhetoric, Ernst Wendland elaborates that original OT authors used substance and structure to manipulate thought and engender response to divine love.³ NT writers employed rhetoric in a similar manner using the OT as their frame of reference but establishing a trajectory to the kingdom of God with coordinates set by Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus' indelible impressions on His contemporaries are visible in the transmitted NT. There are ingredients in the Gospel of John derived from the current ideas of the time, but underlying these ingredients there is a vivid impression that comes from the authors' personal experience with Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁴ Despite this, the authors had to write in a language with its own cultural bias which may have constrained what they wrote. Third century theologian, Tertullian advocated that thought and language are inseparable.

Our acquaintance with literate culture prejudices our perception of oral culture. Literate thought and expression emerge from and is relative to orality. The shift from orality to literacy engages thought and expression that is language related. The transcription of the New Testament utterances from oral tradition to written texts involved painstaking contemplation, careful statement, expression of deep and complex issues, and ideological biases.⁵

The *Koine* Greek was the vernacular of that era. The writings are not so much of the formal or artistic (Attic Greek), but of the popular type of literature which had developed into a

³ Ernst Wendland, "Recursion and Variation in the "Prophecy" of Jonah: On the Rhetorical Impact of Stylistic Technique in Hebrew Narrative Discourse, with Special Reference to Irony and Enigma," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 1997, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997), 67-98.

⁴ William Sanday, "Interpretation of the Gospels" *Essays in Biblical Criticism and Exegesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 36.

⁵ Water J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 1-3.

global language in the wake of the worldwide expansion of Greek tradition during the period of Hellenism.⁶ Butcher suggests that Greek literature is the one entirely original literature of Europe. Homer, Aristotle, Plato, not to say Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are still the modern masters of the intellect. The Greek language remains the most perfect organ of human speech and largely because “they were talkers, whereas we are readers.”⁷ Bernhardt reiterates, “They studied diligently how to talk.”⁸

Christianity experienced its Genesis at a time when the Koine dialect of Greek epitomized the modern principles of pragmatic linguistics. The authors were able to verbalize their recollections of Jesus and their own thoughts quite comprehensively. Their cognitive abilities were no doubt enhanced by the *Koine* dialect in which it is believed they expressed their ideas. The concept of the equation of language and culture maintains that a language’s structure tends to condition the ways its speakers think, for example, the way a people views time and punctuality may be influenced by the types of verb tenses in their language.

New Testament writings reflected (especially the texts of the compositions of the books Luke and Hebrews) a high level of language sophistication. This is an indication that the authors possessed well-developed cognitive and communication skills. Their copious use of recursion to add depth and give clarity to utterances, also may attest to their heuristic skills.

⁶ A.T. Robertson, *The Grammar of the New Testament Greek in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 46.

⁷ Butcher, *Harvard Lecture on Greek Subject*, (1904), 129, 203.

⁸ Gottfried Bernhardt, *Grundriss Der Griechischen Litteratur: Th. Innere Geschichte Der Griechischen Litteratur. 1867 German Edition* (Charleston, NC: Nabu Press, 2010).

The thought-language relativity postulated by psycholinguists, according to William Harvey, may be applied to shed light on the theological tradition of Greek New Testament autographs in the same manner that the hypothesis is employed to explain the differences between German, French and English philosophical traditions.⁹ Robertson declares that “it would indeed have been strange if these authors had shown no literary affinities at all.”¹⁰ John Mahaffy adds that: “The literary excellence of the New Testament is not accidental. The elements of that excellence can be analyzed; I contend therefore that the peculiar modernity, the high intellectual standard of Christianity as we find it in the NT, is caused by its contact with Greek language.”¹¹

From literary, developmental, and evolutionary standpoints, the OT is the substrate of the NT writings. Allusions, comparative analysis, typology and commentary are synthesized in the matrix of this OT substrate. Theological arguments emerge from comparisons between Moses and Jesus, Elijah and John the Baptist, and Daniel and John the Revelator. Commentary that fails to juxtapose the testaments and consider the morphology of the substrate language lacks depth. Underpinning derivations and differentiations with their integral roots are a part of the formula that help to bring clearer understanding to the expressions of NT writers in the NT superstrate.

The pendulum of this compendium will swing from substrate to superstrate, ancient words to modern words, and from divine intelligence to artificial intelligence. From a corporate point of view, H.D. Clifton relates that fifth generation computer systems incorporate sophisticated methods of utilizing computational power through *artificial intelligence* and

⁹ William Harvey, "Linguistic relativity in French, English, and German philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 40 (1996): 273-288.

¹⁰ A.T. Robertson, 84, 85.

¹¹ John Pentland Mahaffy, *The Progress of Hellenism in Alexander's Empire* (Memphis, Tennessee: General Books LLC, 2010), 139.

artificial neural networks. This he says includes the development of expert systems and *intelligent interfacing* by way of artificial computer languages. Intelligent interfacing means the ability of computer systems to accept, understand and convey information in the form of written and spoken natural languages, and as visual images.¹² This corporate understanding has borne fruit not only in the world of commerce and business but holds tremendous potential for theological understanding especially in the symbology encountered in apocalyptic writing. The application of neural networks to linguistics and theology may yet reveal new dimensions in the study of the Apocalypse (the book of Revelation).

This volume, *The New Testament Writers: Why They Wrote How They Wrote*, will therefore attempt both a synchronic and diachronic examination of New Testament writers thought and language that encompasses ancient, recent, current and futuristic models from which reasonable deductions can be made to moderate discussions on New Testament authorship and theology and also to reasonably assess innovative trends in the application of ultra-modern technology to areas of study that combine psycho-linguistics and the Christian scriptures together for balanced views in related discussions.

The ideas directly gleaned and formulated from Biblical, theological and secular sources should provide useful information for further research in New Testament hermeneutics, systematic theology, biblical exegesis, and the use of artificial neural networks in theological thought. They may also provide some interesting insights into the relationship between faith and science, oral and literate cultures, the philology of the NT, and the hypothesis that postulates that language directly influences thought (linguistic relativity). The volume is therefore much more than a post mortem of existing thought paradigms. Instead, it telescopes through a vacuum of first familiar and then unfamiliar space to focus on a distant but tangible galaxy of thought that

¹² H.D Clifton, *Business Data Systems*, 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1986), 31.

is brought sharply into exploratory focus to reveal more about why NT writers wrote how they wrote.

Readers must bear in mind the sobering comment of Timothy Jones – who expresses the sentiment of what is widely accepted today in theology – that the original manuscripts of the NT writers are not recoverable since they have crumbled into powder centuries ago. Despite this he says, the thousands of copiously copied copies with their thousands of differences provide reasonable testimony to the “truth” [what they actually wrote].¹³ This is the premise of this volume, and its conclusions and corollaries assume this perspective.

¹³ Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 31.