

A Word About Words

I gathered from the feedback I had recently that many readers found new and valuable insights into the richness of words and expressions in the biblical languages that often remain inadequately translated. Here are more offerings.

We saw last week that *ahavah* (Hebrew = love) is a concept of action, that is, love has to be expressed in action and cannot remain some kind of feeling or emotion. So, Deuteronomy 6:5 asks for love with heart, mind, inner being, strength and all one's energy.

The related word in the Aramaic Jesus spoke is *khovv*. So, when 1 John 4 speaks of love it is clearly the kind of love that has to be expressed in action. The writer says that love of God is fake if it is not expressed in action through love of neighbour. Love only works when it is given away.

When Jesus says, 'Love your enemies,' he is not talking about feelings, but about action. Love of enemies is demonstrated by kindness, listening, and striving for understanding. It is a behavioural love, not an emotional love. Recall the quote from Abraham Lincoln,

'I don't like that man; I need to get to know him better.'

Here is an action statement deciding to resolve a relational situation.

Likewise, recall Jesus asking Peter, 'Do you love me?' and Peter replies in the affirmative. Jesus virtually says, 'Do it. Show me in action', 'Feed my sheep.' In other words, minister to the ones I love; that will be a demonstration of your love.



The common Aramaic verb for 'forgive' is *shavaq*, but 'forgive' is its metaphoric meaning. The primary notion is to leave behind, let go, set free, allow, remit. So forgiving is an act of setting free and letting go. The forgiver lets go and the forgiven is set free. The one forgiving is not acting from a superior position benignly granting a favour but is simply letting go. True forgiveness does not hang on to anything.

In the episode of the woman brought to Jesus accused of adultery (Jn 8) there is no word of forgiveness from Jesus, just a simple letting go, with a cautionary reminder that this is no way to live. Surely, she went away set free, ready to make a fresh start.

The Greek verb *aphiēmi* means 'forgive' but it also has primary connotations of set free, let go, get rid of, leave alone, permit. Both Semitic and Greek cultures saw forgiving as an act of liberation and leaving hurt or offence behind. Both cultures agree that true forgiveness cannot hold a grudge or feed the memory of past hurt.



In both Hebrew and Aramaic, the verb *khanan* (חנן) means to show graciousness, favour, compassion. The name Hannah means gracious one. In the proverb:

NRSV	Hebrew - Literal Translation
Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him. Proverbs 14:31	The oppressor of the poor/helpless mocks his maker but he honours him who is gracious /compassionate to the needy one.

Notice how the singular nouns and verbs in the Hebrew make the actions of oppression and compassion personal. Showing graciousness and compassion has a keener sense of empathy than being kind. See how Jesus has internalised this spirituality: (my translation of the Aramaic Peshitta)

'Whatever you did to one of these, the least of my kin, you did it to me.' (Mt 25:40)

Shalom שלום