

A Word about Words 2

Perfect

If we were reading the end of Matthew 5 we would read Jesus saying,

‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’

~ and we would read on; this doesn’t apply. Who can be perfect?

In Matthew’s Greek the relevant word is *téleioi*, which means ‘meeting the highest standard’ in the sense of ‘perfect’. But in reference to people it means ‘mature’, ‘full-grown’, ‘complete’ and ‘fully developed’ in a moral sense. Unlike perfection these qualities are achievable.

The Aramaic equivalent that Jesus would have used is *g^emir*, which means finished, polished, rounded off. Moving towards maturity and full personal development is the unmistakable connotation here.

So, Jesus is encouraging growth to wholeness and maturity – a striving for moral excellence and achieving one’s potential, not flawless perfection. The implication is that we step out on the road to wholeness; we are a work in progress, striving to be what we can be.



Soul

The Hebrew word that is commonly translated as soul is *nefesh*, which actually means breath. In Genesis 2:7 God breathes life into the *adam* who then becomes a living being. The idea of a soul as an independent, spiritual principle took some time to emerge in Semitic thought, and really only appears in the Second Temple period, after 500 BCE. Hebrew thinking may well have been influenced by theories of Aristotle and Plato on the notion of the human *psuchē*.

So, when texts like Deuteronomy 4:29 speak of finding the Lord ‘...if you search after him with all your heart and soul’ the word *nefesh* is used to signify one’s inner being. It is something like search with all your breath, spirit, inner being. When the poet of Psalm 6:4 is ill and asks for healing, he cries, ‘My soul also is struck with terror’ (NRSV). The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation has, ‘My whole being is stricken with terror’, which is a much better rendition of *nefesh*, avoiding the word ‘soul’ with all its Christian baggage.

Were you ever taught that when we sin there appears a black mark on our soul? Very unhelpful! – although I guess it was a dualist left brain attempt to simplify a difficult concept. Pity it was so misleading, being all about *me*. Be thankful if you were one of the lucky ones who, as a child, was helped to see things in terms of relationships, e.g., doing the wrong thing disappoints the person we have offended and disappoints ourselves by slowing down our growing up, our journey to wholeness and maturity.

Consider this example from Psalm 11:5 in two different English versions:

The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked,
and his soul (*nefesh*) hates the lover of violence. (NRSV)

The LORD seeks out the righteous man, (*man is not there in Hebrew; ‘one’ would be better*)
but loathes the wicked one who loves injustice. (JPS)

The Hebrew poet has used *nefesh* to intensify the Lord’s utter hatred of those who love violence. He is certainly not suggesting God has a soul or breath. In other words, the Lord’s very inner being despises the lovers of violence. Pretty strong language! empowered by rich metaphors. By the way, the English verb ‘test’ of the above NRSV is closer to the Hebrew *bakhan* than ‘seeks out’ in the JPS version.

The NRSV tries to represent the original by translating the word *nefesh*. The JPS does not translate it but renders its intensive meaning in a different way. In this instance the JPS reflects the sense of the Hebrew better than the NRSV.

Little things like this can help us realise how many variations there are in different translations. Reading Scripture literally in the original languages is dangerous enough. Reading it literally in flawed translations is perilous, particularly if one puts faith in any single English version.