



Understanding Hebrew Idioms

Truth about Hebrew phrases of speech

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Comments like “a bull in a china shop” and “when the cows come home,” fill the English language. These terms are called “idioms.” An idiom is a phrase that can’t be taken literally and doesn’t always stick out like a sore thumb. It’s a manner of speaking that is natural to native speakers and can be confusing for others. Every culture has its own collection of sayings that suggest thoughts. When a teen says something is “off the chain,” the teen is actually giving their seal of approval. Such an age-specific phrase doesn’t cross the culture barrier very easily as our minds take in foreign information word-for-word, instead of thought-for-thought. A person who is new to English would be easily confused if he heard the phrase “absent without leave.” There are also many Hebrew idioms that are hidden within the Scriptures which can be easily misunderstood.

The Scriptures were originally written in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. For hundreds of years, Hebrew idioms have been literally translated into English. The problem is, many times, the words are translated correctly, but the original Hebrew thought is lost. The words are there, but the meaning is missing. To understand this, just imagine writing that someone “kicked the bucket” and imagine your reader actually thinking a bucket was physically kicked.

When idioms are hidden behind literal reading, confusion sets in. Most people don’t recognize the hidden Hebrew idioms that they read in the Bible. One such statement was used by the Savior in the Gospel of Matthew. “Think not that I am come to destroy the Law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily, I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, not one jot or one tittle shall pass from the Law, till all be fulfilled,”

Matthew 5: 17-18. For most modern-day Christians, the previous verse means that the Torah and the other books of the “Old Testament” have been fulfilled, or done away with. They say that, “all was fulfilled” when Jesus said, “it is finished.” Is this really what the Jewish Messiah meant? Just consider the Master’s own words. Has heaven and earth passed away? Of course not! Then, the Law and the prophets remain necessary and essential to living the Almighty’s will.

The Messiah quoted a Hebrew idiom when He said He came not to destroy the Law or the prophets. He was using a Rabbinical phrase that was familiar to His audience. During Biblical times, if someone heard a Bible teaching and didn’t agree, they would say that the Teacher was “destroying the law.” If someone heard a teaching they thought was the right interpretation they would then say, “yes, this is fulfilling the law.” These are technical terms used in rabbinic argumentation. Read in context, the Savior had been accused of misinterpreting the Law, yet He said that He was actually rightly and correctly teaching it. Traditional Jewish writings support this idiom, “Should all the nations of the world unite to uproot one word of the Law, they would be unable to do it,” Leviticus Rabbah 19:2.

Hundreds of idioms are found throughout the Scriptures such as “if your eye is evil” or “heap burning coals.” The changes occur when the idioms and phrases of speech are taken out of the Hebrew language can really mix up the truth. We should not gloss over the confusing “contradictions” in the Scriptures. Nor should we mix up the modern and the ancient. To best understand the Bible, one should learn to study, and to live the Biblical culture.