

Science and Unique Words

Commentary for October 1, 2009 — Unique Words Can Make a Difference

Consider two passages from the Holy Scriptures, one from King Solomon and the other from the apostle Paul:

"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honor of kings is to search out a matter."

• *Proverbs 25:2*

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

• *Romans 11:33*

As Dr. Martin has written previously, we believers are more than kings. We are the children of God legally, with the same status as the resurrected Christ. This is because we are **"in Christ,"** quickened with him, and co-bodied with Him (Ephesians 2:19, 3:6, 5:31–32; Colossians 2:13).¹ We as God's children have every right to **"search out"** anything in God's creation, particularly its mysteries that He has concealed which are characteristics of His glory.

However, because God's **"wisdom and knowledge"** have such great depth, some information about the physical creation can be gained only if He reveals it to us. In other words, some things about God, how His creation was accomplished, and how it operates today, cannot be known unless God Himself tells us about them. Some information about God comes through observation of His creation (Romans 1:19–20), but much more information (and more important information) about God comes from His self-revelation through His prophets and finally through His Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1–3). Today that revelation is with us through the printed Word of God, the Bible, with the New Testament given to us through the life and work of the apostles.²

I mention this to introduce this month's article "The Bible and Scientific Mysteries." (Please read the [October 2009 Newsletter](#) first.) Dr. Martin notes that there are "science" portions of Holy Scripture that can shed light on several of today's scientific mysteries. These are mysteries about basic things such as the sequence of creation events, what is light, what is gravity, and how do they operate? Dr. Martin asks intriguing questions and gives some possible answers from Scripture.

Dr. Martin believed that we will know many of those secrets before Christ's Second Advent. He calls for increased study of the Bible, reading and understanding certain texts of Scripture from a scientific point of view. God, through the Bible, has much to say that is of interest to science. Not all of the concealed things of God deal with the Bible doctrine, prophecy, or history. Some deal with science, which is the method of observing God's physical creation and trying to explain its mechanisms. Science has not been able to understand several basic mysteries about the mechanisms of creation.

There are words in the Old Testament (far fewer in the New Testament) that occur only once and even more that occur only a few times. The meanings of many of those words are

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1. See Dr. Martin's article "[The Philosophy of Christianity](#)" and his comprehensive discussion in his book *Essentials of New Testament Doctrine*.
 2. Dr. Martin's book *Restoring the Original Bible* deals with the design and development of the Holy Scriptures and how prophets, priests, kings, and apostles gave us our present written Word of God.

uncertain or have been lost. Knowing more precisely what those words mean could open avenues of scientific inquiry for the benefit of all mankind as we approach the end times.

Hapax Legomenon

Words gain meaning from the words around them. This is called "context." All words are influenced, molded, or shaded in their meaning by the context of surrounding words. When words occur many times with several contexts, the particular meaning of a word in any instance can be more precisely determined.

Hapax legomenon is a Greek phrase that means "words that occur once." The phrase is explained in the Wikipedia article "[Hapax legomenon](#)": "**A hapax legomenon is a word which occurs only once in either the written record of a language, the works of an author, or in a single text.**" In the Old Testament a *hapax legomenon* is a word occurring only one time in the entire biblical Hebrew text. Actually there are degrees to which words occur only one time. Some unique verbs, for example, have noun forms related to them so that the meaning of the once-occurring word can be determined with some confidence, with possible errors due to figures of speech unknown (or forgotten) by later readers, translators, and commentators, but fully understood by the original audiences.

When a word occurs only once in the entire Bible the context is limited and attempts to determine the meaning of that word are made. One way is to look at parallel passages to help expand the context of *hapax legomenon*. Another method is to find that word in nonbiblical documents (such as Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls) to discover additional usage and additional contexts. Similar words in related languages can give clues to meaning. For biblical Hebrew, cognate Akkadian, Ugaritic, and even ancient and modern Arabic words seem to be very useful. Some scholars feel that the meaning of unique words can be determined by its form. Some rabbinical Jewish scholars consider tradition helpful in determining the meaning of *hapax legomena*.³ They may be correct; they may be wrong. No one can be sure until more instances of these unique words are found in additional contexts. Discoveries of new historical documents are needed to give new examples of biblical *hapax legomena* words.

The Bible is about God. All the words in the Bible explain to us about God, His Son Jesus Christ, and their relationship to us who are the sons and daughters of Adam. All the words in the Bible have a purpose, which is to tell us about God. The words that occur once or only a few times in Scripture, even though those words may be important, their importance is lost to us because the meaning of the words was lost.⁴

Many of the unknown or uncertain words occur in the Wisdom books of the Bible. These are the very portions of Scripture that Dr. Martin discusses in this month's article. According to Cohen and the *Jewish Encyclopedia* article, the Book of Job contains the most *hapax legomena*; Isaiah contains the second greatest number. Some of those Scriptures are God's direct words speaking to mankind about creation, scientific matters (i.e., Job chapters 38–41). Correctly understanding those unique and incompletely understood words can help science to new research and study to explain some of basic mysteries of our existence in God's creation.

David Sielaff
david@askelm.com

3. See Chaim Cohen's book *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978). This is the latest and best current work on the subject.

4. For example, did you know that the identification of several clean and unclean animals listed in Leviticus chapter 11 and Deuteronomy chapter 14 are actually unknown? This is surprising but obviously the people in the wilderness during the time of Moses understood perfectly which animals were meant. Again, interpreters and translators are guessing, and the rabbis do not know either. See the article "[Hapax Legomena](#)" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1904), pp. 226–229. On the right side of the webpage are "Original Pages." Click on them to see the original image pages.