

T and Sympathy

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There's some amazing stuff in the Bible that you aren't meant to see. You're meant to *hear* it. As you may know, almost no one *read* the books of the Bible when they first appeared, partly because there were few copies, partly because many were illiterate, and perhaps most importantly, because hearing from God was meant to be a community experience; they *listened* to the Word together.

Part of what they heard, especially in Hebrew, and that we miss in English translation, were hundreds—maybe thousands—of puns, alliterations, double meanings, onomatopoeia, and other plays on words, that made listening both informative and entertaining. The New Testament writings are more straightforward narratives and letters, but they still include some creative touches. For example, the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews is written in a high literary style, with rich vocabulary, elegant phrasing, and sophisticated rhetorical arguments. It is written to a group of Jewish converts to Christianity, so it assumes the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures, but it uses them like a jazz musician uses a familiar melody as a basis for creative riffs. And, like the ancient Hebrew poets and prophets, the writer often uses word play to add an artistic touch to the letter.

While most of these are simply flourishes, one is a long-buried gem that was only unearthed in the 1990s. By me, in fact. It's one of the few original contributions I made during my academic career, so I suppose I'm entitled to use it in a sermon. As you might guess, biblical texts have been scrutinized for hundreds of years and don't yield a lot of secrets, but now and then someone stumbles upon something undiscovered—in this case, largely due to the fact that almost no one reads the original texts out loud. I did so, heard something unusual, dug deeper, and was able to show that what I found was both intentional and significant.

To help you understand this meaningful instance of word play, I need to begin with a bit of background on the cross. You may be surprised to learn that the instrument of Jesus' execution was not commonly used as a symbol until several centuries after the Christian movement became established. Today, of course, there are crosses everywhere in churches, on top of churches, and hanging around necks. We have lost sight of the association in the Roman world between the cross shape and writhing, screaming victims suspended naked in public places, slowly dying of asphyxiation, whose bodies were often left to decompose in place. No one would think of making jewelry of this, any more than we would today hang little gold nooses or electric chairs around our necks. In fact, nothing in our time approximates the horror and degradation of this form of Roman punishment.

As a result, for the early Christians, this part of the story of Jesus was a major public relations problem. To Jews, such a shameful death contradicted the notion of a pure Messiah; to Gentiles, the idea of a god suffering was nonsense. Hence, Paul refers to the gospel as "a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles." Under these circumstances, it made no sense to promote, as a symbol, the instrument of Jesus' execution. Instead, early Christian art and inscriptions used other symbols such as a fish, an anchor, a shepherd, or a sheaf of wheat.

When early Christians began to use crosses, they often presented them in a kind of code by combining them with other symbols, such as a Tree of Life, the mast of Jonah's ship, the top of the anchor, or a serpent on a standard (by which Moses healed the Israelites in the book of Numbers). It's also worth noting that the letter in the alphabet that looks like a cross can either be a Latin cross (our lowercase t) or the Greek *tau* (our capital T). Crucifixions occurred on both shapes, with the horizontal beam affixed either below the top of the vertical pole, the Latin cross; or on top of the pole, the Greek letter *tau*. No one is sure which kind of cross was used for Jesus.

What does all this have to do with the Epistle to the Hebrews? The answer is contained—or I should say, *hidden*—in Chapter 2, verse 14. There, after the author explains that Jesus took on human flesh because he wanted to share our nature, he writes, "he shared these things so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil." In English translation, there is nothing remarkable about the

style of this statement—I'll come back to that—but in terms of *content*, it may be one of the most important statements in the New Testament. In these few words, a profound, history-changing, life-changing concept is introduced.

How so? Psychologists and philosophers agree that the fundamental human problem is our awareness of our own death, and much of human activity—from procreation to politics, from architecture to art—is motivated ultimately by our drive to overcome mortality. *The Denial of Death*, an influential book by Berkeley post-Freudian psychologist Ernest Becker, explains how fear of death subconsciously drives us, and how our modern solutions, especially therapy and self-awareness, fail to deliver us. We pursue every possible means to delay death, we engage in myriad activities to forget it, we attempt mentally to rise above it, and nothing works. In this short passage in Hebrews, however, the writer asserts that God, out of love for us, responds to our problem of death not by avoiding or delaying it, not by distracting from it, not by transcending it—but by transforming it. And God accomplishes this not by some abstraction or pronouncement from afar, but by true *sympathy*—a word that means, literally, “to suffer with.” God suffers. Death is the answer to death. Jesus willingly dies, in the most painful, shameful way that it was possible to die at that time. As this writer declares, our suffering is *crossed out* by his. Of all that distinguishes Christianity from other belief systems, this is the one element that is both unique and profound. God answers suffering by suffering. How does this work? By the simple principle that the greater the sacrifice, the more the value of the gift. And here, in the greatest act of love in history, where the most innocent victim imaginable voluntarily endures the greatest harm conceivable, and thereby achieves the greatest effect possible—as v. 15 puts it, “to free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.”

The *content* of this statement is enough to absorb. But there is something else here that is remarkable. Presumably because of the cultural taint of the image, the word “cross” is never used in this passage. Instead—well, I want you to listen to the verse in Greek, as it would have been heard, not read silently, by its original audience:

me <i>Tesken</i> Tōn auTōn	he shared these things
hinna dea Too TannaToo	so that through death
kaTargaysay Ton To kraTos	he might destroy the one who
ekonTa Too TannaToo	has the power over death
TooT esTin Ton diabollon.	that is, the devil.

In case you didn't have time to count, that was eighteen "t" sounds in part of one sentence. Is *tau* simply a common letter in Greek, such that this sort of thing might happen every now and then by accident? Could this be a coincidence, the result of words essential to the author's line of thought? And if it is done on purpose, would the writer and the audience notice the remarkable coincidence between the cross-shaped letter and the content of the statement?

The first two questions are easy enough to answer. *Tau* is a common letter in Greek, as T is in English, and occasionally the letter is used in several consecutive syllables for effect—alliteration is the term—but nothing like this frequency, anywhere in ancient literature. As a coincidence, eighteen T's in eighteen words is almost impossible. And of course, there are no coincidences for an author like that of the Epistle to the Hebrews, whose letter one scholar of rhetoric called "a kind of melody in words." If the composer didn't like the effect, he could find synonyms without T's, or he could insert other words to break up the string. But in fact, the opposite is the case. That is, the writer of Hebrews had plenty of choices for other words but chose the T option every time, including some rare synonyms and unnecessary definite articles.

I can't help wondering how the passage took shape. I picture an elderly man at a table with pen in hand, a page of scratch papyrus before him. He is thinking about a way to make the point that the death of Jesus answers our fear of death. He writes the word death, *tanatoo*, twice in a short space, and the sight or sound catches his attention. "This is the cross!" he says to himself. Then he begins to consult the treasure of his talented literary mind for synonyms and additional touches until he comes to the final form that we have now. He leans back and smiles, imagining the effect when this is read aloud and the audience gets it.

Did they get it? We have no record of the response of the early church to these writings. As time went on, the practice of reading texts aloud gave way to silent study; and soon enough, the Bible was translated into Latin and other languages, so this remarkable sign of the cross in Hebrews was hidden in silence for centuries.

It is extremely difficult to encapsulate a great truth about God in just a few words. And in any language, it is next to impossible to come up with anything more than a silly ditty like “Peter Piper picked a peck” when using the same consonant a dozen or more times in a sentence. What this person wrote, and the skill with which he wrote it, can only be called inspired—in all the best senses of that word.

If I were to render this into something in modern English that conveys a bit of the word play along with the substance, it might come out something like this:

Through death he was to pay the cost
For all who were to death’s power lost;
Ah, devil, you’ve been double crossed!

Unfortunately, our contemporary inclination for quick, clear communication curtails our slowing down to savor the sensational sounds of words. Yet God *speaks* through the created world, which abounds with sounds—not only whispering winds and waterfalls, babbling brooks and dawn songbirds, but also human voices that sometimes soar in song or take their time to rhyme. Uniquely through us as word-wielding instruments, God can convey both the truth of beauty and the beauty of truth, as we see in Hebrews 2:14. Here, if we gear our ears to hear, is a God who loves us not only with substance but also with style.

T and sympathy. *T and sympathy*. After telling this tantalizing tale, it’s tempting to terminate with a terse “ta-ta”—but to take the traditional tack: “amen.”

