Some Insights from the Bible on Pride and Humility



The concepts and words that express pride and humility are very prominent in the Bible.[i] The purpose of this study was to catalogue the scriptural verses related to pride and present several insights gleaned from the process. Due to the vastness of the material and the limited space, the study was primarily concentrated on eight common words related to pride and humility. A word search was done using the four main biblical texts in common use: NASB, NIV, KJV, and NKJV. The results of the search were significant in terms of the volume of the results with 250 matches for the eight words catalogued in the NIV. There were 233 matches from the NASB, 190 in the NKJV, and 156 in the KJV. In the NIV, 200 matches were located in the Old Testament (OT) and 50 in the New Testament (NT). In order to provide the best sense of the uses of the words, the search results from the NIV were selected for analysis in the KJV text using an interlinear Bible since that was what was available. A spreadsheet was developed showing the various Hebrew and Greek words, along with the contextual usages and corresponding English translation in the KJV when it differed with the NIV. This is included in a separate document in the PDF version (see attachments).

The first OT word which expressed the concept of pride was found in Leviticus 26:19. Strong's says that this Hebrew word *ga'own* is the same as *ga`avah* meaning arrogance or swelling.[ii] The context of the usage was Moses' giving of the detailed instructions of the Law. In this text, Moses had finished a statement of the rewards God would give if the people kept the law, and then proceeded to state the punishments for disobedience. Verse 14 began the treatise, "But if you will

not listen to me and carry out all these commands." Verse 17 continued, "I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies." Then verse 19a expanded the warning, "And I will break the pride (*ga'own*) of your power." A word search in the NIV for the opposite concept, humility, surprisingly located it in the very same spot in the text. Although the first occurrence of the word "humble" in the NIV was in Exodus 10:3, the first of a similar word "humbled" occurred a few verses later in the same section of Leviticus. The Hebrew word *kana* in Leviticus 26:41 is very similar in meaning to *anah* in Exodus. The former expresses the idea of "bending the knee" or "bringing low," whereas the latter expresses a concept of "looking down."[iii] The context in Leviticus was such that the humility spoken of was something that God was going to enforce on the people because of their disobedience, as in making the people bow before God. The context in Exodus revealed a similar interpretation, with Moses and Aaron asking Pharaoh; in effect, "how long would it be before this ruler bowed before them in obedience to let the Hebrews leave." The first occurrence of a word related to humility in the NT expressed a similar concept. In Matthew 11:29 Jesus spoke about putting on his yoke, for "I am meek and lowly (*tapeinos*) in heart." The Greek word *tapeinos* means "depressed," "cast down," or "lowly."[iv] Other variations in the NT expressed similar meanings, including *tapeinosis* in Luke 1:48, *tapeinoo* is 2 Corinthians 12:21, and *tapeinophrosune* in Ephesians 4:2.[v]

The first NT word which expressed the concept of pride is the Greek *phusioo* and was found in 1 Corinthians 4:6. The word literally means "puffed up," and was rendered that way in the KJV.[vi] The NIV rendered the word "pride," and only appears in 1 Corinthians and Colossians for a total of seven times in the Bible. In the modern sense, we might think of a long-winded politician (or minister) and say that, "he is full of hot air." Such a usage would properly express the concept of pride that Paul made in the Epistles. In this context Paul was warning the people in Corinth that they should consider themselves equal with each other as Christians and not act proudly with their wisdom. The first occurrence of the word rendered "proud" in the NIV was spoken by Elizabeth in Luke 1:51 and was the Greek word *huperephanos*. This word means "appearing above others, haughty, or proud," from the sense of the Greek root "huper," meaning above, and "phaino," meaning to shine.[vii] In this sense the word means literally "one that is shining above others." The context of this first usage was Elizabeth's blessing of Mary, in which she moved from a specific blessing of Mary to a general blessing of God, "He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts (1:51)."

There is often a narrow difference in the language of the Bible between words that refer to a humble person and those referring to the proud one. This creates a greater volume of scriptural references to pride and humility than can easily be located in a word study. In Psalm 18:27 the NIV reads, "You save the humble (*aniy*) but bring low those whose eyes are haughty."[viii] The KJV translates the Hebrew word *aniy* as "the afflicted," a rendering which may do better justice to the Hebrew which

also means poor, lowly, or needy.[ix] Many other nuances of usages of common words in Scripture point to pride. Sometimes the proud are equated with the foolish. In Psalm five, King David poured out his heart to the Lord in a beautiful prayer for protection, "Hearken unto the voice of my cry, my King, and my God: for unto thee I will pray (v. 2)." David went on, "For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy site (v. 4-5a)." The NIV renders the same portion of verse five as "The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes." Isaiah chapter 33 speaks of what is considered arrogance in the NIV, but "fierce people" in the KJV (v. 19). The NIV translates the Hebrew word *mits'ar* in Job 8:7 as "humble," but the same word in the KJV is "small." Since the same common words are used to express both pride and humility it is clear after examination of the preceding verses that an understanding of the context is critical. A hilarious example of the translational difficulties that arise when common words are used to represent pride is found in Proverbs 17:7, "Excellent speech becometh not a fool: much less do lying lips a prince." The humor is that the NIV translates the same verse as, "Arrogant lips are unsuited to a fool– how much worse lying lips to a ruler!" Which is it, *excellent* speech, or *arrogant* lips? The Hebrew word in question is *yether*, which means "overhanging, or an excess."[x] It is evident that the later NIV more accurately reflects authorial intent. Another text that displays a similar translational issue with the common words is 1 Peter 3, in which a word translated "humble" in the NIV is translated "pitiful" in the KJV. In the author's *humble* opinion the translation of those particular verses is *pitiful*!

God viewed arrogant people as lowly or unimportant in his eyes, even if they held high priestly offices in OT Israel. The prophet Zephaniah made an interesting statement in the context of his pronouncements against the nation of Israel. In chapter three, Zephaniah said, "her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law (v. 4)." The NIV rendered the passage, "her prophets are arrogant, they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law." The Hebrew word rendered "light" in the KJV was *pachaz*, from the sense of froth from boiling water, or figuratively as "unimportant."[xi] Zephaniah's rebuke of the religious authorities was eerily similar to Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew 23. In verse 17 Jesus stated, "You blind **fools**! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? (NIV, emphasis added)." Jesus' statement followed his clear commandment not to call anyone a fool: "whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire (Matt 5:22b-ff.)." Jesus was righteous in speaking through the power of God in condemning the pride of the Pharisees. God especially hates pride and arrogance among religious authorities. All of us in ministry would do well to heed the caution given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:12, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! (NIV)."

There is a fine line in the Bible between prideful arrogance and boldness of witness for God. This is especially true in light of the similarity of the Greek NT words for them. In 2 Peter 2:10 the word

referring to arrogant (men) in the NIV and "presumptuous" in the KJV is *tolmetes*. Tolmetes comes from the word *tolmao*, meaning "boldness."[xii] The context of 2Peter is an address to the early Christians warning them about the false prophets that were among them in OT times, and a prophesy about them being in the church. Tolmao appears in different contexts in a variety of ways. For example, in Matt 22:46 tolmao means "dared" and was translated as such in the NIV, with the KJV reading "durst." In this context, tomao meant something like "nobody was bold enough to ask (tolmao) Jesus any more questions." A similar usage is found in Mark 12:34. Later in Mark, *tolmao* appears in a different context such that the meaning is "boldness." In Mark 15:43, Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body so that he could properly prepare it for burial in his new tomb. The NIV renders the text, "Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly (tolmao) to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body." Second Peter is the only place where tolmao appears in the NT. The other ten usages of the English word "boldness" in the NT are from the Greek *parrhesia*.[xiii] In every single case, the word is used in the positive sense of godly boldness in proclaiming the message of the Gospel, or in resting upon the promises of God. In Hebrews 10:19 the text reads, "Having therefore, brethren, boldness (*parrhesia*) to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus" In 1 John 4:17, "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment . . . ." It is interesting that Peter's use of *tolmetes* refers specifically to the false teachers, who likely spoke with similar *boldness* as that of the real disciples of Jesus. Boldness can be a godly attribute, as in Peter and John's joint prayer in Acts 4:29, "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness (*parrhesia*) (NIV)." Alternatively, this quality can be that of demon led teachers "to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever (2 Peter 2:17b, c.f. v. 10 in the NIV)." As future ministers, we must boldly proclaim the Gospel to outsiders, but must be careful not to fall into the prideful ways of the false teachers. We should heed Paul's caution regarding our reputation among those outside the church, "Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil (1 Tim 3:7)."

James provided two excellent examples of biblical humility using variations of the same Greek word *tapeinoo*. Variations of this word throughout the NT indicate a state of humility, or the verb (to) "humble."[xiv] In 1:9 James said, "The brother in humble (*tapeinos*) circumstances ought to take pride (*kauchaomai*) in his high position (NIV)." It is evident that the English word *cacophony* is related to the Greek word *kauchaomai*, which means "rejoice" and is translated as such in the KJV.[xv] James used the word pride and humility in the same sentence, with both words spoken of in a positive, affirming sense. The KJV rendered the word *tapeinos* as "of low degree," which again revealed the OT concept of bowing to authority. In 4:6b James said, "God opposes the proud (*huperephanos*) but gives grace to the humble (tapeinos) (NIV)," with the KJV rendering the same. The word *huperephanos* was frequently rendered "proud" and occurred five other times in the NT, including James 4:6. The NIV rendered it this way except in Romans 1:30 where it read "arrogant." James hit on the common words for both pride and humility in the same verse, and used them in

ways that it was easy to determine a sense of good or bad. Dan Denk from Intervarsity Christian Fellowship wrote in the mid-1980's on this subject of good versus bad pride.[xvi] The point of his article was that we could put on a false humility and in so doing, actually *become* proud. We don't drink or smoke or go with girls who do, so we are extra special Christians! "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts (Prov 21:2)." We must strive to conduct our studies with these cautions in mind less we get pumped up with pride.

Pride can be shown in a variety of good ways, but again there is a fine line between good pride and sinful pride. The Book of Numbers tells us in an editorial comment regarding Moses, "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." It is evident from Scripture that Moses was a very humble man (Heb 11:24-28), yet he was "mighty in words and in deeds (Acts 7:22). Just because he was powerful did not mean he fell victim to pride, although at times this was evident even in his life, as when he struck the rock twice in either impatience or unbelief (Num 20:11). David was also such a godly person as Moses, called a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22). The Psalms speak to the greatness of David through his love for the Lord. Psalm 47 is a song of praise, "Clap your hands, all you nations, shout to God with cries of joy" (v. 1b-ff., NIV). The KJV renders verse 4 as, "He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency (*ga'own*) of Jacob whom he loved." The NIV renders the Hebrew word *ga'own* as "pride," such that the verse reads, "He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loved." Strong's says the word means "the same as (arrogancy), excellency, majesty, pomp, pride, proud, and swelling."[xvii] The closest word in the Greek NT is *thesaurus*.[xviii] Along that fine line, pride can be a good thing when it is in the eyes of God. David's son Solomon with the Proverbs attributed to him (Prov 1:1) was second only to Jesus in wisdom (Matt 12:42). Proverbs 17:6 reads, "Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children (NIV)." The Hebrew word *tiph'arah* translated "pride" in the NIV is translated "glory" in the KJV. In 2 Corinthians 5:12 Paul said, "We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride (*kauchema*) in us . . . (NIV)." Paul also used positive references to pride in several other texts, for example 2 Corin 7:4, 8:24, and Galatians 6:4. James did so in chapter 1, "The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position (v. 9 NIV)." Due to all the negative biblical baggage that has come from the word pride, perhaps we should use a different word when we make our own righteous statements in a manner acceptable to God. Instead of saying, "I'm so proud of you Kathie for finishing your homework," maybe we should say, "Kathie, thou art the excellency (*thesaurus*) of my household, and I glory (*kauchema)* in you. Thanks so much for finishing your homework." This would move the object of our affirmation to Kathie's accomplishment through God's providence, and away from our "proud-ness" of being the father that raised this smart, pretty, overachieving, witty, and happy child! We can look approvingly upon the accomplishments of others, but we must walk a fine balance when we begin to compliment ourselves, even though this may not be sinful in and of itself.

In the Book of Matthew Jesus addressed the Pharisees and said, "Do not be called leaders; for One is

your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted (23:10-12 NIV)". Jesus' statement preceded a series of stern rebukes against them, primarily on the basis of their arrogance and pride. Perhaps we can miss the deeper insight of this section of text, which speaks to the rulership of the future kingdom. The leaders of the *future* kingdom will be from among the humble in the *present* kingdom. This insight into the future kingdom stands in stark contrast to the failures of God's people throughout the Scriptures in the areas of pride and humility. Spurgeon commenting on the verse said, "The way to rise is to sink self; the lower we fall in our own esteem, the higher shall we rise in our Master's estimation."[xix] **James 4:10**states**, "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord and He will exalt you."**God's teaching in Proverbs is clear, "The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way And the perverted mouth, I hate (8:13)." For a study on pride and arrogance, these say it better than anything can!

Seminary mentors would do well to monitor their protégé's "pride meter" in light of the vast scriptural evidence of pride among God's people in the OT, and specific warnings in the NT. In Galatians 6, Paul cautioned the churches in Galatia to be on the lookout for this very thing. "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else (v. 3-4 NIV)." The context of the passage is in a short discussion on church discipline, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin . . . (v. 1)," and as such would be of special relevance to the church leadership. The NIV renders the middle of verse four as, "Then he can take pride in himself . . . ," showing once again the concepts of sinful pride alongside that of godly pride. Paul's warning can be taken by seminary students literally, at least in part, as a caution regarding the power they have at their hands while exercising church discipline. Power can lead to pride, hence the reason for Paul's explicit caution to the church when dealing with matters of discipline.

"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8 NIV)."

Jim Hill, Christians for Christ Ministries, May 2013

END NOTES

All Scripture is KJV unless otherwise indicated.

Strong's Hebrew Dictionary, #1347, 1346.

Ibid., #3665, 6031.

Strong's Greek Dictionary, #5011.

Ibid., 5014, 5013, 5012.

Ibid., #5448.

Ibid., #5244, 5228, 5316.

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Strong's Hebrew, #6041.

Ibid., #3499.

Ibid., #6348.

Strong's Greek, #5113, 5111.

Ibid., #3954.

Ibid., #5013.

Ibid., 2744.

Daniel Denk. "I Wanna Hold My Hand, Can We Love Ourselves Too Much?" Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, March 1982. [N.B. The author has a copy if anyone would be interested in reading it.]

Strong's Hebrew, #1347.

Strong's Greek, #2344.

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