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JAPANESE WHISPERS



To Mrs. Brice, who took the edge off the poles

If any man preach any other Gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

*Galatians 1:9*

Within days of my moving to Kyoto to work as an English teacher, a convivial Japanese man in a dapper suit and brightly coloured cravat appeared at my door bearing books. I had been witnessed by the Jehovah's Witnesses, and they had sent round a missionary to save my soul. Though I enjoy the company of rude apocalypticals, I had already read stacks of Witness literature and several books about them whilst researching a dissertation comparing their beliefs on the body to those of early Puritans. They were academically interesting to a point, but that point had been passed, and I was too old to enjoy baiting narrow-minded Christians for the hell of it. When my visitor introduced himself as William, however, and told me in a plummy accent that he had lived in York for ten years, I was intrigued by this curious specimen of cross-culturalism. I sent him away with my dissertation, and told him I would speak to him again once he had read it.

He returned the following week with his wife, and I invited them in. My funky skinhead girlfriend and my curmudgeonly guests eyed each other with mutual disapproval. She bolted upstairs, and William (*née* Takeya) turned his attention to my work.

"I notice you have quoted many books in your dissertation, but you have not quoted *The Bible*..."

I did not feel that *The Bible* was relevant to comparative history. I asked him about the seven failed predictions of the apocalypse made by the elders of his church. He did not feel this was relevant to the modern Witnesses, who ceased to set dates for Doomsday after a final misjudgement in 1975.<sup>319</sup> This tit-for-tat nastiness was not going anywhere so we moved on to scripture, and touched briefly on Taoism, but William was clearly suffering. Eventually he explained that he had been sitting Western style in chairs for so many years that his knees were severely tested by sitting cross-legged on the floor in the normal Japanese manner. There were no chairs in the house, so he decided he would stand.

His wife carefully helped him to his feet. She was not as westernised as his knees; her English was poor, her accent thick, and she barely entered the discussion. On one occasion, however, she piped up with a word pertinent to a scriptural point, but I couldn't catch it. She repeated it several times, but I couldn't understand.

"Fruitage," said William, helpfully.

"*Fruitage?*" I repeated, suppressing a giggle. It is a silly word and it sounds like 'frottage'.

"Yes. 'Fruitage'."

"That's not a word," I said, with the calm authority of an experienced English teacher.

"Yes it is, it's a Biblical word," he said, with the calm ease of a dedicated Bible-thumper. He smiled warmly as he showed me the relevant verse. "Fruitage."

"I see. 'Fruitage.'" No arguing with that.

Why was this poor woman learning archaic language fit for nothing but an angry red line in my classroom? She could barely string a sentence together, how had she beat the teacher? Why was this happening?

This ridiculous word is found in *Galatians*,<sup>320</sup> a letter Paul wrote because he was concerned about how the Gospels were being interpreted in a community a few Greek whispers away. *Galatians*, along with the rest of *The New Testament*, was written in Greek generations after the death of Jesus, who preached in Aramaic. This is just the beginning of the story. At one point there were around fifty roughly contemporary Gospels covering diverse subjects, esoteric to various degrees, written from various perspectives, including *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and *The Gospel of Judas*. In the second century, in a political move against rapidly proliferating Gnostic groups, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons decreed that all but the fab four *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John* were heretical. Translations of this censored Bible multiplied in different tongues over the next millennium and a half, and were hastily compiled into several versions of the Greek *Textus Receptus*, all of which are full of typographical errors.

These were one major source for our familiar *King James Version (KJV)* of 1611. The other was the Latin vulgate, translated in the fourth century from Hebrew by St. Jerome, a man who described the writings of the prophets as “rude and repellent”.<sup>321</sup> The *KJV* retains the errors and prejudices of both sources. The translators were not Hebrew scholars, and didn't care to consult the rabbis who were, so they could not learn much from the original *Old Testament*. For reasons discussed in ‘Jürgen's World’, King James was concerned that the good book should be conservative, neither controversial nor confusing, with few textual notes and as close as possible to the aging *Bishop's Bible* which was popular at the time. Consequently the *KJV* was already dated when first printed, and has become progressively more arcane ever since. It is an admirable work of poetry, but as a translation it leaves much to be desired. The Witnesses revised certain details according to their own enigmatic beliefs, but left the archaic language as it was. The fruitage of all this is that my guest spends her evenings translating into Japanese this bastard Bible, which is a questionable revision of an archaic translation of a compilation of translations of contradictory transcripts taken generations after the events they purport to report.

Anyone who takes an English Bible as Gospel is seriously misinformed. As well as the errors, much of the depth of the original is lost in translation. For example, the *KJV* begins:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth<sup>322</sup>

But Hebrew is a complex tongue, and Biblical grammar is ambiguous. The line can also be rendered:

With a beginning, [it] created *Elohim*, the heavens and the earth<sup>323</sup>

This is much more interesting. There is something before God, but it is an unnamed gap, as befits something limitless and indefinable. This implied thing created *Elohim*, which is a more complex word than our ‘God’. The root is *El* (power), but though the grammar surrounding *Elohim* points to a singular noun, *-im* is a plural ending, equivalent to *-s* in English words. This ending is also used for abstractions, as in “*la chayim!*” (to health!) This divine emanation, the first name of God, can be conceived of pluralistically or in the abstract. Right in the first line of *The Bible* we meet a God who is created, like heaven and earth, like Adam and Eve, like us. We are given a relative to relate to, and license to conceptualise ‘the powers’ in more than one way.

The Hebrew of *The Old Testament* is deep and ambiguous, open to all kinds of interpretations, like any good esoteric text, like all the best people, like the elementary particles of matter, but few know enough Hebrew (or psychology or physics) to appreciate the detail. Other languages function differently, defining things with a greater or lesser degree of rigidity, emphasising different elements of thought. Over the next few chapters we

will explore how language influences psychology, how it filters perception, highlighting certain aspects of the scene and veiling others. We will also see what can be done to get behind it.

Scripture from different linguistic families can be radically different, and even contradictory, as it offers different approaches to different worlds. *The Bible* was a Hebrew book for the Hebrews. This remarkable string of letters was incorporated into an expanding Christendom as well, but in translation, simplified and politicised towards certain ends. Going past the priests back to the original, we will witness Jehovah and his gang of Edenic denizens in a new light, digging up a layer of significance all but forgotten, and revealing some intriguing parallels with modern psychology and neuroscience. We will also find, you will be pleased to hear, find a formidable stash of psychedelic drugs in its pages.

