

## Contronyms (and You and the Bible)

The legendary University of Houston basketball coach, Guy V. Lewis, is said to have once quipped that basketball is “the only sport you can’t play, coach, or officiate.” If he didn’t say it, he probably should have.

English is similar in that you can’t really speak it, teach it, or interpret it with any degree of certainty. And “yes,” I resemble that remark. Though English (or at least the American version of it) is my native language, and the only one in which I am even passably fluent, I struggle to speak, write, or understand it with reliable precision. Non-English speakers say it is among the hardest languages to learn, probably because of its ambiguity. For example, “wound” can be either a “bodily injury,” to “inflict bodily injury,” or the past tense of “wind” (which itself can be “the act of coiling” or a “stiff breeze”!). The English language’s multitudinous “rules” and their exceptions often add more confusion than clarity, such as “i” before ‘e’ except after ‘c’ or when pronounced as ‘a’ as in ‘neighbor’ or ‘weigh’.” That’s just plain (or is it “plane”?) weird.

Adding to all of the above, there are also words that have two very different, even opposite, meanings. They are called “**Contronyms**.” For instance, to “sanction” can mean either to “approve or require something” or to “disapprove or prevent something.” Good luck! Context is your best hope, but even it requires a keen understanding of still other words!

However, not all languages are so imprecise and confoundedly complicated as English. Though Hebrew has its own difficulties, it is often less confusing than the English words used to translate it. The term **baqa** (*baw-kah*), for instance, basically means to *divide*, *split*, to *cut an object into two or more parts*, as in when Abraham “**split** wood for the burnt offering,” Gen.22:3; or when the waters of the Red Sea were “**divided**” in Ex.14:21. But (and you knew there would be one, didn’t you?), **baqa** is also rendered as “**cleave**” in Hab.3:9 (and in other passages) by the KJV, ASV, and NASB. **So?**

The word “**cleave**” is a classic **contronym** because **it has contrary and even opposite meanings** depending on its context. Isn’t English fun? Perhaps not so much so at times! Consider our above examples in light of Gen.2:24’s divine directive that a man becoming a husband “*shall leave his father and his mother, and **cleave** to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.*” So “**cleave**” means to “**separate**” or “**divide**” in Hab.3:9, but to “**cling to**” or “**be joined to**” in Gen.2:24.

But here’s the kicker: though several of our English translations use “*cleave*” in these opposing ways, the Hebrew texts from which they are taken did not. Remember how **baqa** from Gen.22:3; Ex.14:21; and Hab.3:9 means to “*split*” or “*divide*”? The Hebrew word in Gen.2:24 is **not baqa**, but **dabaq** (*daw-bak*), which means “to cling, stick, stay close to, be joined to.” Thankfully, more modern translations seem to have made an effort to avoid using a contronym to translate differing Hebrew (or Greek, Latin, or Aramaic) terms.

**What’s the “take-away” point to all of this?** That the Bible is hopelessly confusing and impossible to correctly understand and apply? **Of course not!** That one must learn Hebrew and Greek to understand the Bible? **Nope**. By and large, most major English translations are incredibly accurate and reliable. But sometimes, **we humans**

**needlessly complicate what God made simple**, cf. 1Cor.14:33 and 2Cor.11:3. *Baqa* means to “divide” or “separate,” and *dabaq* means to “join” or “cling to.” Simple.

**Now**, go “*search the Scriptures*” and see **to what God says “join” and “cling,” and from what He says to “divide” and “separate”!** (Philip C. Strong; Viking Drive Church of Christ; 3791 Viking Drive, Bossier City, LA; online at [vikingdrivechurchofchrist.com](http://vikingdrivechurchofchrist.com); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))