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A BIBLICAL IDIOM

"Idiom" has been defined as: A manner of speaking that is distinctive of a certain people or language, not readily understandable from its grammatical construction. Our focus here will be on what biblical scholars have termed a *Hebrew* idiom. It minimizes a first clause in order to emphasize a second clause.

For example, suppose the pastor of a church said: "This church is *not* my church; it is God's church." In what sense would he mean it was not his church? Certainly if he was the pastor, he could correctly refer to it as his church. But by using "not" in a *comparative* sense—rather than an *absolute* sense—the emphasis is shifted from the first clause, to the second. By placing the word "only" in the first clause, and "also" (or perhaps "rather") in the second clause, the actual meaning would be: "This church is not my church (only), but (also, rather) it is *God's* church."

In this article I will provide over 35 examples of the Hebrew idiom. The reward for pursuing these examples will be the clarification of certain verses that would, otherwise, be obscure, even contradictory.

Genesis 32:28 is a good starting place. To Jacob God said: "Thy name shall be called *no more* Jacob, but Israel." The meaning is that his name would no more be called Jacob (only), but he would have another name (also, rather)—the name Israel. The proof may be seen by the fact he was called Jacob many times *after* this, even by God himself: "And God spoke unto Israel...and said, Jacob, Jacob..." (Gen. 46:2).

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, yet Joseph stated: "So now it was *not* you that sent me here, but God" (Gen. 45:8). Recognizing the idiom, it could be worded: "So now it was not you (only) that sent me here, but it was God (also, rather)"!

In their wilderness journey, the Israelites murmured against Moses and Aaron (Exod. 16:2). But in verse 8 we read: "...your murmurings are *not* against us, but against the LORD." Considering what was just plainly stated, we recognize the idiom: "Your murmurings are not against us (only), but (also, rather) against the LORD"!

When Israel rejected Samuel and cried out for a king, God said: "They have *not* rejected you, but they have rejected me"

(1 Sam. 8:7). Yet verse 8 shows they had rejected Samuel. Again, it is the Hebrew idiom, the meaning being: "They have not rejected you (only), but they have rejected me (also, rather)."

Peter used the idiom when he spoke to Ananias: "You have *not* lied unto men, but unto God" (Acts 5:4). Ananias did lie to men; but the emphasis is on the fact he lied to God: "You have not lied unto men (only)—your sin goes further than this—you have (also, rather) lied to God"!

"Behold, the days come...that it shall *no more* be said, The Lord lives, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. But, The Lord lives, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north..." (Jer. 16:14, 15; 23:7). Over the centuries and to our present day, it is still said that God brought the Israelites out of Egypt! (cf. Acts 13:17, etc.). At Passover time, when a son asks: "What is this? You shall say to him, By strength of hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt" (Exod. 13:14). Recognizing the idiom, it would read: "The days come when it will not (only) be said, The Lord lives that brought Israel out of Egypt, but (also), the Lord lives that brought Israel from the land of the north," etc.

In Isaiah 43:18,19 we read: "Remember *not* the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing." But a few pages later we read: "Remember the former things of old..." (Isa. 46:9). What would otherwise be a contradiction is harmonized by recognizing the idiom. "Remember not (only) the former things, neither consider (only) the things of old," but (also, rather) the new thing.

The use of the idiom appears in Joel 2:13: "Rend your heart, and *not* your garments, and turn unto the LORD." Rending garments and putting on sackcloth was a common mourning custom (2 Sam. 3:31). In view of this, the meaning was: "Rend not (only) your garments, but rend your heart (also, rather)."

Jesus said: "Labor *not* for the meat which will perish, but for that meat which endures unto everlasting life" (John 6:27). If we fail to recognize the idiom, this verse would sound like a command not to work! But other verses command that we should work for our food (2 Thess. 3:10, etc.). The actual thought, then, is that we should not work for the material necessities of life (only), but (also, rather) for that which will endure unto everlasting life.

When some were amazed at the teachings of Jesus, he said: "My doctrine is *not* mine, but his that sent me" (John 7:16). Was Jesus saying his doctrine was not the same as the Heavenly Father? No. Considering the idiom, he said: "My doctrine is not (only) mine, but (also, rather) his that sent me."

Jesus said: "Whosoever shall receive me, *receives not me*, but him that sent me" (Mark 9:37). Those who like to pick at the Bible, will quote a verse like this, and ask: "What kind of sense does this make—'Whosoever shall receive me, receives not me'?" They fail to recognize the idiom. The meaning is, "Whosoever shall receive me, receives not me (only), but (also, rather) him that sent me."

The same idiom can be seen in John 12:44: "He that believes on me, believes *not* on me (only), but (also, rather) on him that sent me."

When Lazarus was sick, Jesus said: "This sickness is *not* unto death, but for the glory of God" (John 11:4). But the sickness was unto death. Lazarus died. Apparently this was an idiomatic way of saying that the sickness was not unto death (only), but (rather) for the glory of God—in that Lazarus was raised from the dead.

When the Seventy disciples rejoiced because demons were subject to them through Jesus' name, Jesus replied: "Rejoice *not* that the spirits are subject unto you; but *rather* rejoice, because your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:17-20). It was not wrong for them to rejoice because their ministry was effective, that demons were subject to them. But, to keep the emphasis on the greater good, Jesus said: "Rejoice not (only) that the spirits are subject unto you; but (also) *rather* rejoice because your names are written in heaven."

The use of an idiom may even be implied in Jesus' words: "Fear *not* them who kill the body...but *rather* fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body..." (Matt. 10:28). Wouldn't anyone experience fear if he was about to be murdered? Jesus himself felt fear as he faced death, sweating as it were great drops of blood (Luke 22:42-44). Allowing an idiom, this verse would read: "Fear not (only) them which kill the body, but *rather* fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body..." The word "rather" implies a *comparison* with what has just been said.

When Jesus sent out the Twelve he told them: "It is *not* you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaks in you" (Matt. 10:20). Did they speak? Of course. Again, the idiom is apparent: "It is not (only) you that speak, but (also, rather) the Spirit of your Father."

When they would be accused before rulers or kings, Jesus said: "Whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak: for it is *not* you that speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11). In other words, "It will not (only) be you that speak, but (also, rather) it will be the Holy Spirit."

Peter said he believed Jesus was *the Christ*. Jesus replied: "Flesh and blood has *not* revealed it unto you, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). But Peter *had* heard this from "flesh and blood"—before he ever met Jesus. Peter's own brother had told him: "We have found the Messiah, which

is, being interpreted, the Christ" (John 1:41). All is clarified once we recognize the idiom. It was not flesh and blood (only) which had revealed this to him; it had now been revealed to him (also, rather) by the Father!

In John 4:21-23, Jesus said the hour was coming, and then was, that true worshippers would not worship at Jerusalem or in Samaria—that God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth. But after this men did worship God at Jerusalem (Lk. 24:52,53; Acts 2, etc.). Recognizing the idiom, we realize that people would not worship at Jerusalem (only), but (rather) in spirit and in truth—regardless of location.

Jesus said: "When you make a dinner...call *not* your friends, nor your brethren...but call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind" (Lk. 14:12-14). Again, the idiom makes the first part into a strong negative, in order to emphasize the second part. The meaning is: "Call not (only) your friends, but (also, rather) the poor, blind," etc. If this was a command against inviting friends to supper, why did Jesus accept invitations to eat with his friends? Friends and relatives eating together, even having feasts, was a common practice in the Bible.

A comment on this passage in the *Cambridge Greek Testament* says: "We must take into account the idioms of Oriental speech...the 'not' means, as often elsewhere in Scripture, 'not only...but also' or 'not so much...as'."

Jesus said to the disciples: "You have *not* chosen me, but I have chosen you" (John 15:16). But, the fact is, the disciples did chose Jesus. He did not *force* them against their will. Here, again, the idiom reduces the first clause, to place the emphasis on the second: "It is not (only) a case of you choosing me, (rather) I chose you!"

Jesus said to his disciples, "The world *cannot* hate you, but me it hates" (John 7:7). Yet other verses say the world *did* hate them (Matt. 24:9; John 15:18; 1 John 3:13). Again, there is a strong case for the idiom. In other words: "The world cannot (only) hate you, but (rather) it hates you because it hates me."

Jesus said to forgive a repentant brother seven times in a day (Luke 17:4). Yet in another place he said do *not* forgive seven times in a day—but "seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). Recognizing the idiom, Jesus was saying to forgive seven times in a day, yet not (only) seven times, but (also, rather) seventy times seven! In other words: Keep forgiving!

John the apostle used the idiom: "Let us *not* love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed" (1 John 3:18). The context speaks about a brother in need. If we have this world's goods and do not help him, we do not really have love. We can *tell* him we love him—we can love him with our words—but this is not enough. Thus the instructions: "Let us not love in word (only), but (also, rather) in deed."

Paul said: "I labored more abundantly than they all: yet *not* I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). Paul labored. This is clear. Yet to emphasize the grace of God, he used the idiom.

Writing to the Thessalonian believers, Paul said: "When you received the word of God which you heard of us, you

received it *not* as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). The obvious meaning is: "You received it not as the word of men (only), but (also, rather) as the word of God." See 1 Thessalonians 4:8 for another example.

Writing to the Ephesian believers, Paul spoke about putting on the whole armor of God. "For we wrestle *not* against flesh and blood, but against [demonic powers]" (Eph. 6:12). What he was saying is this: Our battle is not with physical people (only), but (also, rather) against demonic powers. This must be the intended meaning, for people—flesh and blood people—*did* cause trouble for Christians. All kinds of people, including Alexander the coppersmith, caused Paul considerable trouble (2 Tim. 4:14; 2 Cor. 11:23-26). The use of the idiom places the emphasis on the *spiritual* battle that rages, even though flesh and blood people are involved in that conflict.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake" (KJV). If we took this at face value, it would be a command *not to drink water!* But because water in those days was commonly polluted—causing "often infirmities"—Paul was simply saying to add a little wine to the water for purification. Recognizing the idiom, the translators of the NKJV, NIV, NLT, and others, have correctly included the word "only" in this verse: "No longer drink *only* water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake."

When Paul made the point that those who labor for the Lord are worthy of support (1 Cor. 9:9), he quoted Deuteronomy 25:4: "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." He then said, "Is it oxen God is concerned about?" (NKJV). This could be taken to mean God does not care about oxen. But this would be contrary to the verse just quoted! What then? It is an idiom: "Is it [only] oxen God is concerned about?" The verse quoted provides a *principle*, and is then applied by Paul, not (only) to oxen, but regarding those (also, rather) who labor for the Lord.

Some other possible examples of the Hebrew idiom:

Galatians 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I (only), but (rather) Christ who lives in me."

Philippians 2:4: "Look not every man on his own things (only), but every man *also* on the things of others." Several translations provide this clarification.

2 Corinthians 4:18: "We look not (only) at the things which are seen, but (also, rather) at the things which are not seen..."

Did Jesus come to bring peace? *Yes*. At his birth, the angels said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace*, good will toward men" (Lk. 2:14). He is called the Lord of *peace*, the son of *peace*, and the Prince of *Peace* (2 Thess. 3:16; Lk. 10:6; Isa. 9:6).

He gave *peace* to those who followed him (John 14:27; 16:33). Being justified by faith, they obtained *peace* with God (Rom. 5:1). "Peace be with you" was a phrase used by Jesus and his followers (Lk. 24:36; 1 Peter 5:14).

He preached *peace*; his gospel is called the gospel of *peace* (Acts 10:36; Rom. 10:15; Eph. 6:15). His kingdom is righteousness, *peace*, and joy (Rom. 14:17). He is our *peace*

who has broken down every wall, having made *peace* by the blood of the cross (Eph. 2:14, 15; Col. 1:20). Clearly, he came to bring *peace*!

But then we read the words of Jesus: "Do *not* think that I have come to bring peace on earth, I did *not* come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34; cf. Luke 12:51). This statement would be a flat contradiction. But once we apply the idiom, a good sense is obtained: "Do not think that I have come (only) to bring peace; I did not come to bring peace (only), but (also) a sword" ("division"—Luke 12:51).

The Bible says God has committed *all* judgment to the Son; also that Christ will judge the world (John 5:22; Acts 17:31). So when we read the words of Jesus, "I came *not* to judge the world, but to save the world" (John 12:47), if the use of the idiom applies here, it could read: "I came not (only) to judge the world, but (also, rather) to save the world."

Paul said, "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 1:17). This cannot mean, as some suppose, that Paul did not believe in water baptism. He had just named a number of people he baptized! (verses 14-16). When he brought the gospel to Corinth, "*many* of the Corinthians hearing believed, *and were baptized*" (Acts 18:8). While Paul did not baptize all converts personally, *they were baptized!* And so the idiom is obvious: "Christ sent me not (only) to baptize, but (also, rather) to preach the Gospel."

This "Hebrew idiom," as *Clarke's Commentary* (note on 1 Cor. 1:17) points out, is used by "the writers of the Old and New Testaments...almost everywhere." It is not something found in only a few isolated verses!

In 1 Peter 3:3,4 (KJV) we read that a woman's adornment should "*not* be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart...even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit."

We believe this portion, like the many examples given, is best understood as an *idiom*. Failure to recognize this has led to some extreme and fruitless teachings—like a woman is not to wear *any* jewelry. But when the idiom is recognized, the meaning is simply this: A woman's adornment should not be (only) outward things like fixing her hair, wearing jewelry, and clothing, but (also, rather) the inward adornment of a meek and quiet spirit. This places the emphasis on the inward adorning, but the outward adorning is not eliminated.

If this passage means a woman is not to wear *any* jewelry, as some suppose—then it would also mean a woman *should not wear any clothing!*

Peter continues, speaking of the inward adornment: "For after this manner in old time the holy women...adorned themselves"—Sarah honored her husband Abraham, etc. These women "in old time" were examples of having the inward adornment, but does this imply they had no *outward* adornment like jewelry?

To the contrary, when Abraham's servant was sent to seek a wife for Isaac, he presented to Rebekah "a golden earring..."

and two bracelets for her hands...jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment" (Gen. 24:22, 47, 53).

It should be carefully noted that many verses use jewelry in a good sense (Ezek. 16:11,12; Jer. 2:32; Gen. 41:42; 2 Sam. 1:24; Song of Solomon 1:10; Pro. 25:12; Matt. 7:6; Lk. 15:22).

James wrote about a man who may come into the Christian assembly "wearing a gold ring" and well-dressed. Another comes in, a poor man, who is not well-dressed and his clothes may be dirty. If the man with the gold ring is given a prominent place, and the poor man is set aside to an inferior place, this is sin because of the partiality (see James 2:1-3; cf. 1 Cor. 11:22).

But we may learn something else from this passage. We are not told the man's gold ring was sinful. If the Christians considered it a sin to wear a gold ring, why would they give him a prominent place? Suppose a drunken man came in displaying in his hand a bottle of liquor. Would he be given a prominent place? He could be asked to set aside his bottle, but would the same apply to the man with a gold ring? Imagine an usher telling him he must take off his gold ring before he could come into the assembly!

I wear a gold wedding ring. It is not a sinful symbol; it is a symbol of marital faithfulness.

In the Bible, Mordecai, a man used of God, was given a ring by King Ahasuerus (Esther 8:2). There is no hint that wearing this ring was sinful. Godly men like Joseph and Daniel wore *gold* (Gen. 41:42; Dan. 5:29).

When Paul spoke of building on the foundation of Christ, he used *gold* (spiritually speaking) as a valuable and permanent building material, compared to wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12). If gold represented evil, his analogy would be inconsistent.

Again, speaking *spiritually*, of course, Jesus said, "I counsel you to buy from me *gold* refined in the fire" (Rev. 3:18). If literal gold was in and of itself evil, instructions to buy spiritual gold from Jesus would fail to make a valid point.

Being clothed *spiritually* with "the garments of salvation" was likened by Isaiah to "a bride who adorns herself with her jewels" (Isa. 61:10). This would be a poor analogy if he considered jewelry to be sinful.

If the Bible (1 Peter 3:3, 4) was against any *outward* adornment, how would adornment for the inner person provide a corresponding analogy? The idea that a woman is not to wear any jewelry, or that she cannot fix her hair or wear nice-looking clothing, is not the point. The negative is if the outward adornment is overdone, when it is so extreme it draws attention to the outward person, at the expense of the inner beauty. —RW.

Want to read more? You may request a FREE copy of my 64-page book **WOMEN'S ADORNMENT—What Does the Bible Really Say?**

STUDENT FAILS A 10-QUESTION EXAM (even though his answers were true)

1. In which battle did Napoleon die? **His last battle.**
2. Where was the Declaration of Independence signed? **At the bottom of the page.**
3. What is the main reason for divorce? **Marriage.**
4. What can you never eat for breakfast? **Lunch and dinner.**
5. What looks like half an apple? **The other half.**
6. How can a man go eight days without sleeping? **No problem, he sleeps at night.**
7. How can you lift an elephant with one hand? **You will never find an elephant that has only one hand.**
8. If you had three apples and four oranges in one hand, and four apples and three oranges in the other hand, what would you have? **Very large hands.**
9. If it took eight men ten hours to build a wall, how long will it take four men to build it? **No time at all, the wall is already built.**
10. How can you drop an egg onto a concrete floor without cracking it? **Any way you want; concrete floors are very hard to crack.**

*Spread the laughter,
share the cheer;
Let's be happy while we're here!*

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