



חמַד • Chamad • Covet
Exodus 34:18-27
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As we begin this new year, we are looking at how our translation and understanding of the Biblical text affects our belief regarding what it means to be faithful to God. The Bible is a compilation of hand-written scrolls that were originally written in ancient Hebrew and Greek. There are no native ancient Hebrew and Greek linguists still living, so every interpretation of the Bible, whether it's one of the 450 English translations or one of the other 2000+ languages the Bible has been translated into, every interpretation comes down to what the interpreter believes the text is trying to say. Though it doesn't discount any translation in full, the reality is, the theology of the translator affects the translation.

If you've ever wondered why we have so much division in the church, this is why. The text isn't as "black and white" as some people would have you believe. There are many different understandings of the text, and that is largely due to how we translate the words into our language of choice. Our goal as we begin this year is to consider some individual words in the ancient Hebrew and Greek, and to ask, is our understanding of these words congruent with the intent of the original authors who wrote them? Has our English translation given us the best understanding of God's will or God's love?

Today, we begin with a word that I believe to be low-hanging fruit in this focus on how the Biblical text has changed. I don't think it will be earth shattering for you, but I think it's significant none-the-less. At a minimum, it gives us a good example of how the English language is often insufficient for understanding the Biblical text in its original form. Today's word, from the ancient Hebrew, is the verb *chamad* (khä-mad). It is translated in many ways in the English language, from *covet*, to *desire*, to *wish*, to *envy*, to *lust*. It is perhaps most famous for its use in Exodus 20:17, as part of the Ten Commandments, which reads, "Thou shall not *covet* your neighbor's house; you shall not *covet* your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

I find that the problem with our translation of this word is that it has, in its English translation, lost the intent of the ancient Hebrew. If you Google the word, you'll find there's a lot of disagreement in the scholarly world as to the intention of the word. The word *chamad* is often associated with the word "desire" because it is very similar in root to another word in ancient Hebrew, *nechmad*, which is translated as "desirable." If focusing just on etymology, "desire" or "covet" are appropriate words for the translation. However, as we will find in this case, etymology is often insufficient for translation. Though etymology can direct us in the right direction, what's more important than etymology is context. Context matters most of all, and *chamad* is a good example of why.

First, let's consider why etymology is insufficient in and of itself. When studying etymology, we're asking, what does the root word mean, or how does that root word affect the way we translate the text. A good example of how etymology works is with the word "etymology" itself. *Etumos* is a Greek word that means "true." That word is the root for the Latin word, *etymon*, which means, "origin of a word" (like, the "true origin of a word). And *-ology* comes from the Greek for "to speak," or "branch of knowledge." So, *etymology* can be well defined by its root words as "to speak of the true origin of a word," or "the study of the origin of a word." That's how etymology is supposed to work.

Yet, while etymology can be helpful, in and of itself it is often insufficient. Consider that the word *host* and the word *hostile* have the same root word.¹ The root word for *host* and *hostile* means "stranger." However, when speaking of a *host*, we are talking about one who welcomes a stranger. When thinking of *hostile*, we are referring to one who is unwelcoming of a stranger. You would think that the adding of the suffix, *-ile*, the only difference between *host* and *hostile*, would point us in the right direction to see the difference. However, *-ile* is a suffix that can also be found on the words *docile* and *fragile*, words that have very different meanings from *hostile*. So neither the root, nor the suffix, give us enough information to understand the word as it is used in the English language. It doesn't take much to see that etymology in and of itself is insufficient for translation. The context matters.

Context also matters in the framework of the language for which the word is spoken. Not all words translate well into other languages. For example, if you were to go to Wendy's and want to pick up food to go, you might decide to stay in your car and go to the "Drive Thru Window." Think about that phrase for a minute. How might folks who are unfamiliar with how fast food restaurants work understand what they are supposed to be doing if you tell them to go to the *Drive Through Window*. Yes, there is a window, and yes, you are driving, but you are not driving through a window. This phrase makes sense in our culture, but it would not translate well to someone who is unfamiliar with our culture.

Context matters, and it matters in the mindset of the culture in which the word is spoken.

Looking back at *chamad*, the best way for us to understand what this word was intended to mean is to look into the culture in which the word was first spoken. How is this word used in the greater ancient Hebrew text? What other examples exist for the use of this word, and how might those examples influence our understanding of this word?

Our text for this morning in Exodus 34 offers such an example. Let's take a closer look at what the text has to say.

Beginning in Exodus 20 going all the way through Exodus 31, God is laying down the covenant to Moses; he's naming law after law after law. God covers everything that Moses might possibly need to convey to the Israelites regarding the law. At the end of chapter 31, Moses is sent back down the mountain with two stone tablets that have the covenant written by God's own finger. When Moses came down the mountain, the Israelites were so happy they decided to smelt all their gold and build a golden calf in celebration. This was not in line with the covenant, as it

created an idol to be worshipped, and it detracted from the focus of the Israelites on God. Moses was so mad when he saw the golden calf that he threw the two stone tablets down on the ground and they broke apart. It's an often skipped moment in our ancient history, but yes, the first tablets were destroyed in a fit of human anger.

Chapter 34 begins with the Lord's promise to write new stone tablets. God says to Moses, "cut two new tablets out of stone, like the two I had previously given you, and bring them up the mountain." We're going to have to do this all again. Moses does as he is commanded, and goes to the mountain top with two new stone tablets. Our text today picks up after Moses has reached the mountain top. God is offering an abbreviated version of the longer covenant, which God had laid out in chapters 20 to 31. Instead of taking another 11 chapters to go over the entire covenant again, God spends a very short time, what is printed as just 15 verses, summarizing the 11 chapters of the covenant previously named in full.

In verse 21, God is speaking of how the Israelites should use their time. Work for six days, but take rest on the seventh. Observe the festivals. Three times a year, all the men should go before God. (Yes, God is effectively establishing a quarterly men's retreat ... and it was mandatory.)

There's extra information added on to the instructions regarding the men's retreat. During those times when the men are gone from their homes, the community becomes at great risk of attack or invasion. We're speaking of ancient Israel – men were seen to be the only ones capable of protecting their homes. If all the men are gone, who's there to protect the land? Or the women? Or the children?

To ensure their safety, God adds this extra line into the covenant, found in verse 24: "No one shall *covet* your land when you go before the Lord your God three times in the year." In this sentence, we find the very same word as we find in Exodus 20:17, *chamad*.

Now, consider the context, and think with me, what is the fear the Israelites would have had about their land when the men were gone? Would they have been worried that other empires, other armies, other nations would have a "desire" for their land? Would they be worried that other people would have "wanted" their land? It seems, at least to me, that the fear the Israelites would have had for their land when the men were gone was *not* that someone else would have a simple longing for their land, but that someone would act out on a desire and take the land. It was not a simple internal longing that is their worry, it's the acting out on that longing that would have caused great concern.

Such a covenantal statement begs the question, is God saying that when the men are gone, God will prevent others from having a desire for the land, or that God will prevent others from acting out on a desire to take the land?

This relationship between desire and acting on desire is complicated, and is addressed many times in the Biblical text. When looking through the Biblical text, I find that our English language is insufficient for naming the nuances of the Biblical text regarding "desire."

It seems the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages had a few different words to name the different types of desire that one might feel. There's healthy desire – wherein, a person is desiring the things that are in line with God's will. There's unhealthy desire – wherein, a person is desiring things that are not in line with God's will. And then there's unhealthy desire that has action tied into it, and that action that goes against God's will.

As an example, in Matthew 5: 27-28, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you, 'Whoever looks on a woman *to lust* after her has already committed adultery in his heart.'" In this New Testament verse, the Greek word for "lust" is *episthumeo*." It is the Greek equivalent to *chamad*, often translated as "covet" or "desire." Every time this Greek word *episthumeo* shows up, the concern of the text is not just having a *desire* that goes against God's will; the concern is having a desire that leads one to *act* against God's will.

I find that with our English translation, the word *chamad* has been granted the equivalence of a simple emotional state – a desire with no action. But in every context of use in the Biblical text, *chamad* is referring to a desire that elicits action – action that is against God's will.

Just look at it in the context of the Ten Commandments. The Decalogue, as its often called, is quite different than our modern day legal code. In our 21st Century American Legal Code, our laws are comprised as a list of action and punishment statements. We tell people that when they do something wrong, there will be a punishment. For example, if you park your car in a 2-hour zone, but don't move your car for four hours, you might find that a parking enforcement officer has left you a \$40 ticket on your windshield. There is a punishment for parking more than 2 hours, and yet, nowhere does our legal system say that parking for more than two hours is morally wrong. There's no moral statement that breaking the law is wrong at all. You are free to commit a crime if you're willing to accept the punishment – whether it's jail time, a financial fine, or lost civil rights – but nowhere does it say you shouldn't make that decision. The moral aspect of the breaking the law is left up to you.

However, the Ten Commandments is just the opposite. The Ten Commandments don't name any punishments. Instead, they name that there are things that you should not do because they are morally wrong. The Ten Commandments, as a covenant by God, offer a list of actions that are incongruent with God's desire for creation. If you read through them, they are all prohibitions against actions. "Do not steal." "Do not commit adultery." "Do not create false idols." "Do not use the Lord's name in vain." "Do not bear false witness." They are all use active verbs.

In this context, the word *chamad* shows up not as a prohibition against having a simple desire for someone else's belongings, but as a desire that leads to action – a desire that leads to taking away – it's more than just a wanting, or a jealousy, or a yearning. "Thou shall not covet" says you should not disrupt the harmony of humanity by taking something you want from a neighbor. You can *like* what a neighbor has without it hurting the community, but you *can't* like

it in such a way that it leads you to take it without it being detrimental to the shalom of the community.

This is an important distinguishing factor for two reasons. First, to think of the prohibition as being against a simple internal desire is far more restrictive. God has created a beautiful world, and amazing inventions within it. It seems incongruent with God's creative design to say that one should feel guilty, or morally wrong, for desiring something of God's blessed creation that they see in their surrounding community. God doesn't shame healthy and wholesome desire, especially when that desire is giving praise and adoration to the creation of God.

And secondly, this is an important distinguishing factor, because it sets God's desire for humanity and creation up according to God's will. The will of God for all of humanity – for all of creation – is that we might live at peace with one another in God's eternal love. God wants, yearns for, strives for, and is actively working to bring about the eternal vision of the kingdom, where-in we live in harmony with one another under the total influence of God's love in Jesus Christ. Simply liking what another person has does not deteriorate that vision – but liking it with selfish ambition – desiring it with intent to take it – wanting it with abandoned regard for how acquiring it will affect the shalom of the community ... these are the moral prohibitions that *chamad* is speaking against. This word sets us up in right relationship with God, with one another, and with ourselves.

We should not cheapen the Biblical word due to our insufficient English translations, but claim the fullness of God's desire for humanity as laid out in the ancient texts. God longs for us to delight in the goodness of creation, but not in a way that threatens the peace of the community. As Psalm 20:4 proclaims, "May [God] grant you your heart's desire and fulfill your plans!" ... so long as they do not seek to take from another what is not yours. My, how the Bible has changed. May we reclaim God's truth in our desire to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ that live fully into the peaceable kingdom that God has ordered for all of creation. Amen.

¹ Joel Hoffman. *The Bible Doesn't Say That*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016.