

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

On September 12, 2013, we received the following comment and inquiry:

“Hey brothers! I was just following up on a further question about obeisance versus worship. There's a scripture in the [New Testament] where someone does "obeisance" to either Peter or Paul and he says "rise, I myself am just a man". Why would Peter (or Paul) tell them this unless this was an act devoted to worship and not merely just an act of respect? Either the Society has placed the wrong word here or obeisance must have a higher importance than just respect. Your thoughts? Hope all is well!

To the author, it is good to hear from you again. We will address your specific question below, but first, the question you ask gives us an opportunity to explain something very important.

You know that the Bible writers were not scholars. They were ordinary common place men who were writing to the best of their ability. They were not giving a lesson in theology; they were conveying a message to their audience. Their message was **inspired** of God, but it is not the infallible **word** of God. Jesus is the word of God. (*John 1:1, 14*) We discuss this in much more detail in the article **Is The Good News Really From God?**

As such, we do not believe it is necessary to dissect each individual word used by the writers as a means to gain an understanding of its meaning. It is likely the words were used and understood according to the common usage of the day rather than the way a scholar or linguist might use or understand it.

Think of how many times you, or someone you know, has used the wrong word while trying to convey a certain meaning. The listener understood exactly what was meant because of the context. However, if those words were recorded, someone of a later generation might not clearly understand the meaning. And if they looked up the misplaced word, they might come away with a far different meaning that what was intended. Remember slang and colloquialisms are not uniquely modern creations!

Here is a crude example: Suppose someone wrote “After work, I’m going to the crib.” A person of the 21st century would understand that to mean the person was going home after they left their place of employment. But if those words were read 2,000 years from now, a debate might arise as to whether that was proof that infants in the 21st century had jobs!

Really, it is not at all unusual that the same word is used to convey two different meanings. The key is to consider the word in the context of the surrounding words – looking for the substance of what was being communicated. This way, you will have much greater success at understanding the original writer or speaker’s intent.

Accordingly, if indeed your goal is to understand the meaning of the word used in the scripture you are concerned about, we believe it would be much better for you to consider the context of the scripture rather than seeking the etymology or lexicology of one word. And then make sure the understanding you take away is consistent with the plain and open teachings of Jesus.

To your question, the scripture you are referring to states:

“As Peter entered, Cornelius met him, fell down at his feet and did obeisance to him. But Peter lifted him up, saying: “Rise; I myself am also a man.” – *Acts 10:25-26*

The context reveals that Cornelius, an Italian army officer, was a very devout man who “made many gifts of mercy to the people and made supplication to God continually.” (*Acts 10:2*) Prior to meeting with Peter, an angel appeared to him with instructions to summon Peter to his presence. The account says that Cornelius was frightened but he obeyed. (*Acts 10:3-8*) When Peter arrived, Cornelius thought to give Peter great honor. Imagine what you would have done if you were in Cornelius’ shoes. And angel appeared to you and told you to see a certain man. You would expect this man to be someone of unusual importance so when he arrived, you would likely grant him unusual honor. Thus, we can see that the ‘obeisance’ done to Peter, whether we refer to it as worship or undue respect, it was inappropriate. Peter let Cornelius know that he would not accept such an extreme gesture. We believe this is the meaning we should take away from the verse.

So you see, we were able to respond to your question without resorting to etymology or lexicology. But since you already knew the meaning, your question about the word ‘obeisance’ arises as purely an academic exercise. For our part, we refrain from those matters since they merely “furnish questions for research rather than a dispensing of anything by God **in connection with faith.**” (*1 Timothy 1:4*) Please keep this in mind as you continue your study of the Bible.

Our suggestion to you is to be more concerned with meanings and values than with lexicology and etymology. One does not need to be a Biblical scholar to understand the plain and open teachings of Jesus.

“Elaia Luchnia”
