

Uncircumcised Speech

by Ed Nelson

In the last message preached by the martyr Stephen in Acts 7:18-22, we read a curious statement. He says that Moses, the deliverer of Israel from Egyptian captivity, was an eloquent and powerful speaker. How then did we come to think of Moses having a speech impediment?

There arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.

It was he who took shrewd advantage of our people and mistreated

our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, **and he was a man of power in words and deeds.**

Stephen could not be more emphatic. Moses "was a man of power in words and deeds." Yet we seem to get another story in Exodus 3-6 where we are introduced to Moses' heavy burden—a powerful self-consciousness about his *inadequate* power of speech to convince captive Israel to get ready for freedom, that Yahweh was about to deliver them, and to persuade Pharaoh in the name of Yahweh to release them.

Moses' "heavy speech" issue. In Exodus 4:10 we get the first glimpse of the nature of his self-described inadequacy:

Then Moses said to Yahweh, "Excuse me, Adonai, I have never been a man of words [*devarim*], neither yesterday, nor before, nor since you have spoken to your servant. For I am heavy *kaved*] of speech and heavy [*kaved*] of tongue."

In this case, the word "heavy" [*kaved*] describes the nature of Moses' weighty sense of inadequacy. Twice he used the word "heavy" in parallelism in the same sentence to add strong emphasis—he was a man of "heavy speech" and "heavy tongue."

In Hebrew, the word "glory" [*kavod*] comes from the same root word

as *kaved*, meaning “heavy.” It is spelled with an extra Hebrew letter (*vav*) after the “v” sound to ensure that it has the “o” sound for the last syllable—*kavod*—to distinguish it as meaning “glory.” To have “glory” [*kavod*] is to have “immense weight” [*kaved*].

A man of “weight” [*kaved*] was called a “rich” man. He was distinguished by the “weight” of his precious metals, such as silver and gold, or the volume of healthy livestock. We find that Abraham was very wealthy, i.e., he was a man of “weight” [*kaved*] in his possessions. In Genesis 13:2 we read of his weight of wealth: “Now Abram was very rich [*kaved* - weighty, wealthy] in livestock, in silver and in gold.”

The word *kaved* may also mean “honor.” In this case, it means to add weighty value to someone, like parents. We find this usage in Exodus 20:12 where the fifth commandment reads: “Honor [*kaved*] your father and your mother that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.” Parents should have “weight” [*kaved*].

The apostle [*shaliach*] Paul, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18), does an apparent play on words between the Hebrew sounds and word relationships of *kaved* and *kavod* with his phrase “weight of glory”:

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal **weight of glory** far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

“Weight of glory” in Hebrew is *kaved kavod*! He suggests an eternal “weight of immense weight” far beyond anything else we experience in the course of this life.

What does “heavy speech” and “heavy tongue” mean? Some scholars say the phrase refers to a speech impediment. This is at best conjecture and is not defensible linguistically or historically. If this were the case, other Hebrew words could state a handicapped condition more clearly than the adjective *kaved* [“heavy”]. For example, the words for “stammering lips” are *la’agey saphah* (cf. Isaiah 28:11). Hebrew for “speech impediment” is *moser lashon*

("impediment of tongue"). We find this usage in the Hebrew version of Mark 7:35: "And his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he began speaking plainly."

In Ezekiel 3:4-7, we gain corroborative insight on what "heavy lips" or "heavy speech" means. As you see below it does not infer a speech impediment.

Then He said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. For you are not being sent to a people of unintelligible [*'amek* - "deep", "unfathomable] speech [*saphah*] or heavy [*kaved*] tongue [*lashon*], but to the house of Israel, nor to many peoples of unintelligible [*'amek*] speech [*saphah*] or heavy [*kaved*] tongue [*lashon*], whose words you cannot understand. But I have sent you to them who should listen to you. Yet the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, since they are not willing to listen to me. Surely the whole house of Israel is stubborn and obstinate.

Today we speak of someone who speaks the English language from a certain cultural region as having an accent. Of some who are difficult to understand, perhaps because English is a second language, we say they have a "heavy accent." This is closer to the meaning here in the text than one having a speech impediment.

Since the word for "heavy" [*kaved*] also means "liver", and, to the Hebrews, the liver was considered the seat of emotions, particularly for grief and heavy burdens, the condition being described as "heavy speech" is psychological rather than a physical speech impediment. Moses is melancholy, i.e., "his liver is acting up" with heaviness over his feelings about his inadequate speaking ability. *His lips weigh heavily upon his liver*. He is filled with heaviness over his inadequacy to speak at the effective level of necessity to represent Yahweh to both Israel and Pharaoh.

Hebrews used the physical body to describe the significance of their emotional state of being. In the English-speaking world, we describe our emotions by our state of heart. We are "light-hearted," or "heavy hearted," for example. But ancient Hebrew people spoke of three seats of emotions:

- the liver, for the weight of burdens, trials and grief, either light or heavy

- the heart, for either obedience or disobedience as one “after the heart of God”
- the bowels, for empathy and compassion

Regarding Moses, though he spoke Egyptian powerfully and eloquently, his liver ached with grief over his insufficient command of the Hebrew language.

Moses’ uncircumcised speech. In Exodus 6:12 and 30 Moses further explains his self-consciousness over his “heavy speech” and “heavy tongue” in a complaint to Yahweh:

But Moses spoke before Yahweh, saying, “Behold, the sons of Israel have not listened to me. How then will Pharaoh listen to me,
for I am of uncircumcised [*'ara/*] speech *sephathaim*]?”

“Heavy speech” (4:10) is twice clarified as “uncircumcised speech.” Moses’ reluctance to speak on behalf of Yahweh to Israel first, then on their behalf to Pharaoh, begins to become clear. He is self-consciousness about his “uncircumcised speech.” The language of his lips lacks the spiritual gravity of Yahweh’s authority and power to convince Israel to cooperate, and to persuade Pharaoh to set Israel free.

We are helped to understand Moses’ complaint better by seeing where else in Hebrew literature like expressions exist. Foremost, we find it in biblical expressions.

The prophet Jeremiah said, “For all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart.” (Jeremiah 9:26). One of many similar Scriptures is selected, but the point is clear: foreigners, or the nations (Gentiles), are classified as the uncircumcised. While uncircumcision technically refers to the lack of circumcision of the male foreskin, it is also a general term to describe all Gentiles. A deep prejudice within ancient Judaism was that Gentiles were “uncircumcised dogs.”

When the prophet Isaiah saw Yahweh “high and lifted up” in a vision, he was devastated by the holy encounter. He, after all, was a circumcised Hebrew, a Temple priest, a confidant of the king, and partaker of the covenants of Yahweh with Israel. His experience, however, was comparable to Moses meeting Yahweh at the burning bush—awesome and devastating.

In Isaiah 6:5, the prophet, not unlike Moses, said:

Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean
[*tame*]
speech [*sephathaim*]. And I live among a people of
unclean [*tame*] speech [*sephathaim*]. For my eyes
have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts.

Whereas Moses said his speech was “uncircumcised,” Isaiah said his speech was “unclean”—spiritually unfit for the holiness of Yahweh. The difference is that Moses’ spoke the language of the uncircumcised—Egyptian! Isaiah spoke the holy language, Hebrew, but was contaminated in spite of his circumcision of flesh by his uncircumcised heart. He saw in his vision of Yahweh that the whole house of Israel had uncircumcised hearts. Circumcision of flesh was insufficient for righteousness.

Gentiles were uncircumcised in flesh, therefore, were understood to have no possibility of being in right standing with God. If the flesh was uncircumcised, so was the heart, so goes the argument. If their flesh was uncircumcised, the culture and language of the uncircumcised was as if it were uncircumcised, too. Everything was unrighteous and pagan. Since their hearts were uncircumcised, so were their lips. They spoke uncircumcised speech out of their hearts. They were hopeless and outside the covenants of Yahweh.

The apostle Paul taught this in Ephesians 2:11-12:

Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands—*remember* that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise,
having no hope and without God in the world.

Hebrew people, however, were uncircumcised in the flesh. They were called the “Circumcision.”

Circumcision of flesh, however, should be understood for what it was—a covenantal sign given to Abraham to recall his righteousness that came by faith. It was an important sign, but was only that—a sign to remind Israel and point Israel to righteousness by faith. But it was

never to be taken as a proof of righteousness in the sight of Yahweh as was the tendency. Righteousness always comes through faith, not flesh. Faith is always a matter of the circumcised heart.

Israel, therefore, was circumcised in flesh, but uncircumcised in heart! They were not righteous in themselves because they were disobedient to Yahweh. They had the sign but not the reality. When the heart of a circumcised Hebrew was uncircumcised, though the Hebrew language was considered holy, the speech was unclean [*tamei*].

We should note this important nuance. Gentiles have "uncircumcised speech" because they speak the language of those peoples uncircumcised in flesh. But Hebrew people who have the revelation of God in the Hebrew tongue, the holy language, have "unclean speech" because of their "uncircumcised hearts." They may have the holy Hebrew language of Yahweh's self-disclosure, but the words that come out of their mouths is "unclean speech."

Messiah Jesus [Yeshua] said it clearly: "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matthew 12:34). Again: "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile [make unclean] the man" (15:18).

Isaiah found this to be the case in his vision of Yahweh's holiness.

We understand better the acuteness of Moses' concern about speech. He possessed uncircumcised lips, or speech, because he was nurtured in the culture and language of paganism. Egyptian was his native language. He spoke fluently the uncircumcised tongue of the uncircumcised Egyptian people, but haltingly the Hebrew language of Yahweh's self-disclosure.

Not unlike Moses, Isaiah required divine help to move forward in his high calling (cf. Isaiah 6:6-8):

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips, and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." Then I heard the voice of Adonai, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Uncharacteristic of Moses who said, "Not me! Send my brother Aaron," Isaiah replied: "Here I am. Send me!"

Moses' powerful eloquence in "uncircumcised" Egyptian. As a pagan prince of Egypt reared from infancy in Pharaoh's house, Moses was fluent and powerful in his Egyptian tongue. He was exactly as the martyr Stephen described—"a man of power in words and deeds" in Egypt. He had the authority of the house of Pharaoh when he spoke his native Egyptian language. People listened and obeyed.

But this was not so in the language of God's revelation, i.e., Hebrew. Moses knew some Hebrew, but not much. He was under-skilled to speak it well, let alone speak it on behalf of Yahweh to both Israel and Pharaoh. Moses' Hebrew tongue was "heavy"—disappointingly so. His mother tongue of pagan and idolatrous Egyptian was not the language of Yahweh's revelation. His language was the speech of the uncircumcised—the Gentiles.

The circumcised language of Hebrew. Moses knew neither Israel nor Pharaoh would listen to him. He felt sorely unqualified linguistically to represent Yahweh. One reason for his reluctance to accept his mission from Yahweh was because he felt he couldn't convince Yahweh's people of Israel to listen to him and prepare for their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. If he spoke the message of freedom to them in the Egyptian language of the slave master, they would not believe him—so he felt in his "liver."

Nor, he felt, could he convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites anyway if he negotiated with him in the language of Egypt. He knew political protocol would require ambassadorial status on his part, along with the ability to speak fluently in the native tongue of the One sending him. Moses was being sent by Yahweh, the One and Only God who reveals Himself in a Hebraic context. He needed to speak Hebrew to Pharaoh as Yahweh's ambassador. He needed to demonstrate political clout that came with the language of God. If he spoke in Egyptian, he was the inferior in the eyes of Pharaoh.

You may understand Moses' dilemma better now. The supreme voice of the Egyptian language was Pharaoh himself. Literally, he could make up the language, he was so powerful. He was the law—and he was final authority in language.

In biblical Hebrew, Yahweh is the final law and authority. If only Moses could speak to Pharaoh clearly and powerfully in Hebrew as Yahweh's ambassador.

Moses' laid out his complaint to Yahweh. He had not yet learned that Yahweh was greater than political protocols. He insisted Yahweh was making a huge mistake and begged for someone else to speak in Hebrew to both Israel and Pharaoh instead. Yahweh's anger burned against Moses. But He relented and gave him his older brother, Aaron, to speak to Israel and Pharaoh in the holy language of God's revelation. Moses did not yet understand the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Yahweh's deeds speak cross-culturally. To fill the need over Moses' linguistic inadequacy to speak on behalf of Yahweh to Israel and Pharaoh, Yahweh gave him a physical instrument to reveal heaven's authority and power—namely, his shepherd's rod.

If Moses at that time had understood that Yahweh was trustworthy, that Aaron wasn't needed anyway to match Pharaoh and overcome his resistance to change. Even with Aaron speaking in the political protocol of Hebrew, in the language of heaven's ambassador, it had little value. Pharaoh only hardened his heart, i.e., became more rigid in his defiance and disobedience to what he heard.

The use of Moses' rod, however, became notorious. It beat the protocol of Hebrew hands down. When thrown to the ground, it became a snake that swallowed the snakes of the Egyptian sorcerers. Stretched out over the Red Sea, a mighty east wind came and divided the waters for Israel to cross through the sea to escape Egypt. We cannot envision Moses without the rod in his hand trekking Mt. Sinai or the desert floor.

The Almighty has more than one way to demonstrate his authority and power in a convincing and life-changing way amidst human frailty. Moses' lack of adequate fluency in the Hebrew language to represent Yahweh was really a non-issue. Yahweh speaks powerfully in deeds, as well as in Hebrew. He trumps human language, even Hebrew, with his display of power and might. He is above and beyond the limits and protocols of human language.

The language Yahweh speaks is the language of power and Presence. He speaks his Word and, poof, the whole universe is created. His Spirit mightily overcomes all things that are obstacles to us, within and beyond our cultures.

Where Moses' speech was deficient in representing Yahweh, a shepherd's rod which the Holy Spirit could use was close by in hand to

effectively bring about the better result that changed Pharaoh's mind. Yahweh's mighty hand moved Egypt with ten different plagues that brought final results of deliverance. Political protocol through human speech could never act at this supreme level.

Moses got a lesson in God's language of powerful deeds. He would become a model for others to learn about Yahweh's language that transcends human language.

Paul's speech to uncircumcised Gentiles. The brilliant Jewish apostle named Saul of Tarsus met the Risen Messiah Jesus [Yeshua] in a convincing and powerful way. His story is told in the Book of Acts. A natural apostle to Jewish people, being "a Hebrew of Hebrews," he was sent by Yahweh instead to Gentiles with the message of his kingdom found through faith in Messiah Jesus [Yeshua]. He went where he was most uncomfortable by upbringing and training. He had to speak Greek—the uncircumcised language of uncircumcised people of uncircumcised hearts and flesh.

We recall that the apostle [*shaliach*] Paul had major issues in his apostleship to Gentiles—those with the uncircumcised speech of the Greco-Roman empire.

The Greek-speaking church in Corinth was so distracted by Paul's appearance and accent-laden speech, they came to the point of despising him as well as his accent. They called his speaking "contemptible" (2 Corinthians 10:10):

For even if I boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be put to shame, for I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters. For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and **his speech contemptible.**" Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons we are also in deed when present.

Appearance and presentation are powerful attractors as well as detractors. Paul well understood this in his apostolic mission to Greek-

speaking Gentiles. They despised to hear him speak. He couldn't revert back to Aramaic or Hebrew since many of them had no fondness for these languages. Likely, he spoke Greek with a heavy accent of Aramaic and Hebrew sounding "back of the throat" gutturals detracting from the smoothness of the "off-the edge of the lip" labial sounds common to Greek. They found his speech "contemptible" and his physical presence "unimpressive."

In this cross-cultural jam, Paul appealed to them through powerful and miraculous deeds done in the name of Messiah Jesus [Yeshua]. This was his only way to overcome his "contemptible" speech and yet influence his audiences with the gospel of Messiah Jesus [Yeshua].

Words, he knew, often lacked convincing authority and appeal. He came to understand, like Moses, that representing Yahweh was not a matter of linguistic eloquence, but of power and demonstration in the Holy Spirit [*Ruach ha-Kodesh*] of Jesus [Yeshua] (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:1-5).

Yahweh speaks in his mighty acts. No doubt Paul received encouragement from Moses' linguistic foibles. But more than this, Paul, like the other apostles of Messiah Jesus [Yeshua] of his day, learned from the Torah of Moses that what really matters is God acting on his own behalf with signs and wonders while we participate in what He is doing. We really aren't instruments that God has to use, or even uses. We are merely participants in his mighty acts, joined to Him through faith in Him and his Son Yeshua, going along for the ride in the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit.

Arguing with Yahweh to change his mind and ways, Moses learned, was futile. Yahweh was greater than his fear of Pharaoh and all the armies of the world. He was greater than the uncircumcised people and all the human frailties of his covenant people with uncircumcised hearts. He was the Supreme Ruler of the nations and overcame all the little details attempting to thwart his ways. And to prove it, which He did and still does, He shows up in his awesome power and Presence of his Spirit with signs and wonders to perform. He is Yahweh who speaks through his mighty deeds.

Pastor, teacher and friend is how I would refer to Ed Nelson I hope you have enjoyed his teaching. I trust that you have been blessed by this teaching.

Bill J.