

Examining How Eph 4:8 quotes Ps 68:18

by [Yoseph Viel](#)

Ephesians 4 says this....

"But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ [Messiah]. Wherefore he saith, **When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.** (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ [Messiah]" (Eph 4:7-12, KJV)

If we go back to Psalm/Tehelim 68:18 (68:19 in some numbering systems), from which this verse is quoted, it says this...

"Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men" (Ps 68:18, KJV)

For the most part, the KJV translates these verses rather well. One could argue over the "*for men*" part and whether that's the best grammatical word in English to use or not (The JPS has "among men"). The Hebrew says B'Adam, and a prepositional BET is usually translated "by", or "through" or "in" or "with". But grammar never translates perfectly from one language to another, because grammar does not divide up thought the same way in every language. If we simply keep in mind that there's a range of grammatical words that COULD fit before "men" here, that's good enough.

What seems to bother most people is how the word "received" in Ps 68:18[19] seems to come out as "gave" in Eph 4:8. We understand these to be opposite words that have opposite meaning in English, so doesn't this quotation in Ephesians 4 altar the meaning 100%? This is explained in several ways by several groups of people.

- Some people brush this off as a textual problem, concluding that either one text or another has been changed, but that they probably agreed when Paul made this quote.
- Some people use this verse to impeach Paul's credibility, claiming that he mis-quoted and/or mis-used this verse.
- Still others claim the problem is with the way language gets translated imperfectly from one language to another.

Let me demonstrate why the last of these is the best answer to this problem. The problem is not textual or with Paul, because even the Talmud quotes this verse and applies it in much the same way Paul did. The Talmud has this to say....

"every one of the angels befriended Moses and each of them *disclosed some mystery to him*, as it is written [Psalms, lxxviii. 19]: "Thou didst ascend on high, lead away captives, *receive* gifts among men," which means that because at first the angels called Moses one born of a woman (man), they at the close *gave* him gifts, and even the Angel of Death disclosed a mystery to him" (Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 89a, Rodkinson's translation, 1903, emphasis added)

Here's how Socino translates this same passage...

"each one was moved to love him [Moses] and *transmitted something to him*, for it is said, *Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast taken spoils* [the Torah]; *Thou hast received gifts on account of man*:⁸ as a recompense for their calling thee man [adam]⁹ thou didst *receive* gifts. The Angel of Death too

confided his secret to him..." (Shabbat 89a, Socino translation, emphasis added)

Rodkinson and Socino differ on whether to translate "gave" or "recieve" in the last emphasized word above. However the word used here is LaQaK (לקח), the same word that appears in Ps 68:18[19]. Since both translators were done by Jewish men who do not believe in the New Testament, we can safely say this had nothing to do with trying to provide any credibility to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. However, irregardless of which translation we are reading, we can see from the overall context that the verse is being quoted to support the idea that G-d gave men something, because prior to it being quoted, both authors agree it is discussing how angels gave something to Moses, and then quotes Ps 68:18[19] as relevently applying to that context. So this is a very parallel usage because...

- Paul quotes Ps 68:18[19] and applies it to the context of G-d giving something to men.
- The Talmud quotes Ps 68:18[19] and applies it to the context of G-d (through angels) giving something to men through Moses.

So the problem here is not with Paul, nor is it likely to be the textual transmission. What is the English reader failing to see here? And why is a verse that talks about "receiving gifts" being used to explain how G-d gives gifts to men by both Paul and the Talmud?

Is it because the word LaQaK (לקח) can mean to give or recieve? Not exactly. Rodkinson's translation of LaQaK (לקח) as "gave" here was an attempt to render an interpretation of what the text was saying, rather than give a word-for-word literal translation. But this does provide an example of how different languages can "peel the onion" in different ways, using words that might match very strongly in the most literal basic sense in slightly different ways that don't exactly match in other senses. To understand this better, let's take a look at this explanation of the word LaQaK (לקח) from TWOT...

"In addition to the common meanings of *laqah*, there are a number of extended uses, some of which have theological significance. The "take" aspect of the word may extend, in some contexts, into the meaning "select" and/or "summon." According to Deut 4:34, God "took" (selected) Israel from among the nations (cf. also 4:30; 1 Kgs 11:37; Josh 3:12;4:2). In Job 41:4 [H 40:28] the leviathan is "taken" (selected) as God's permanent vassal who has a covenant with him. "Summon" would fit equally well in some of these contexts. BDB (pp 543, 546) finds "summon" for *laqah* in Num 23:11, Jud 11:5, and 1 Sam 16:11.....

Twice Jeremiah uses *laqah* for the "taking up" or "use" of words. In 23:31 he speaks against the false prophets who "use" (RSV, NASB) their tongues as if the Lord had inspired them. In 29:22 the exiles "use" a curse formula...."

(Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, page 1125, Vol I)

In English, "take" or "recieve" refers to a transfer of ownership of an object from one person to another. But when we say that someone is "taking up tennis", it does not mean that he now owns the sport of tennis, and that ownership has been transfered to him of the sport of tennis. We are extending the base meaning of the word to a slightly different context, and conveying a picture of what someone is doing by drawing an analogy from something the listener already understands. To say someone is "taking on someone" means he is challenging that person, not that he is obtaining ownership of that person.

So when Ps 68:18 says that G-d

"took / recieved / selected / summoned gifts in / by / through / among / with men"

What is it saying? That ownership of some "gift" was transfered from man to God? In English, one could understand the phrase that way. But does that make any sense? Can men really give G-d a gift that is worth mentioning? We understand that LaQaK (לקח) very commonly and very frequently means to "take " or "receive", but it occasionally can be used to connotate "selecting" or "summoning", which is more the sense the word is used

here. And if we misunderstand how LaQaK (לקל) is being used in this sentence, then we cannot correctly understand how the prepositional BET before "men" is being used and whether it should be translated as "in", "by", "through", "with" or "among" or "for", as the KJV puts it. But if we interpret this sentence as "selected gifts in men", the way the Talmud and Paul quote Ps 68:18 suddenly makes sense to English ears, even though "took" or "receive" is the more common usage of this word. Furthermore, because "took" or "receive" fits the sentence so well grammatically, it is easy to understand how it would have gotten translated this way from Hebrew to English or Aramaic or Greek.

Many translations from Hebrew into other languages have felt the need to render LaQaK (לקל), usually translated "took" or "receive", into "gave" in order to render the "same sense" of what is being said to English / Aramaic / Greek ears as what the word LaQaK (לקל) renders to Hebrew ears, even though "gave" is the opposite of how it is normally translated. Let's take a look...

- Hebrew of Ps 68:18 [19]: "*took / received / selected / summoned* [LaQaK (לקל)] **gifts in / by / through / among / with** [ב] **men**"
- Aramaic Targum of Ps 68:18 [19]: "*gave* [YaHaV (סחב)] **gifts in / by / through / among / with** [ב] **men**"
- Aramaic Eph 4:8: same as Aramaic Targum.
- Greek LXX: "*receive* [elabes (ελαβε)] **gifts in / among** [εν (εν)] **men**"
- Greek Eph 4:8 "*gave* [edoke[n] (εδωκε[v])] **gifts unto** [tois (τοις)] **men**" (Note: the ending nun is in some manuscripts, but not all)

The translation of the word LaQaK (לקל) as being either "receive" or "give" is NOT because the word is so ambiguous, we can't tell whether it means to receive something or whether it means the opposite of that. The problem boils down to this....

- In Hebrew, LaQaK (לקל) has a base meaning of "take" / "receive", but sometimes connotes other meanings that are drawn from or derived from a mental image similar to the concept of "take", but not exactly that.
- In English, "take" also has a range of meaning similar to LaQaK, while "receive" has a much narrower meaning. "Receive" almost always refers to a transfer of ownership or possession, while "take" is a much broader word that can mean "receive", but is used more widely than that.
- Because the Hebrew LaQaK (לקל) is being used in a way that connotes the concept of some sort of separation (summon, call, select), rather than a transfer of ownership, translating this as "take" or "receive" might actually be misleading to English ears, even though the base meaning from which the connotation that this word is drawn from is trying to convey. Oddly enough, the word normally associated with the *opposite* of that actually does a better job of rendering the "same sense" in English, Greek and Aramaic.

Having covered this, let me address the errors that have been used to explain this verse...

Error#1 Paul Goofed: Since the Talmud quotes this verse to prove identically the same point, it's hard to credibly maintain that position.

Error#2: Paul was quoting the LXX: The Greek of Eph 4:8 reads different from the LXX, but matches the Aramaic Targums just fine. I've heard people try to explain this verse this way, but most people who make that claim probably didn't consult the LXX before making the statement.

I've heard some people claim that Eph 4:8 is a result of Paul using the LXX, which they claim proves he wrote in Greek! They obviously didn't check the LXX, and it also generates the absurd conclusion that the Talmud was quoting from the LXX!!!! Paul's quote disagrees with the LXX, but does agree with the Aramaic Targums of Ps 68:18[19], and it agrees, in essence, with the interpretation of this verse we find explained in the Talmud. So the

problem is neither textual or with Paul, but merely something hard-to-see for the English reader due to the breadth that words are used in both Hebrew and English. Translation is never a perfect science, but once we dig under the hood, we see that the problem here is not with the Scriptures at all - just how we understand them through English based reading.