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The Double Amen

The word "amen" is probably the most widely known word in the world today, for it has been transliterated into more languages than any other word. Its origins are found in Hebrew language and culture, and in the New Testament alone it is used in 127 verses, most of them quotations from the teachings of Jesus.

When we say the word "amen," we tend to use it as the formal ending to a prayer. Some Christians even use it within church circles as an exclamation of agreement. But Jesus used this word in a very special way, and in order to understand the significance of this word, we first need to investigate its original meaning.

The word "amen" (pronounced *ah-mayn*) is based on a root verb which means, in various forms, "to support with the arm, to carry" or "that which is supported" or "that which is shored up," and thus "amen" came to mean "firm" or "unshakeable." The word is used in this original sense in **Isaiah 22:23**, which states:

> "I will drive him like a peg into a firm [literally "amen"] place; he will be a seat of honor for the house of his father."

This "firm place" symbolized absolute unshakeable stability, and so provides us with the clearest sense of the underlying meaning of the word "amen." Other versions of the Bible provide further shades of meaning, translating "amen" in **Isaiah 22:23** as "sure" (KJV), "secure" (ESV), "firm" (AMP) and "steadfast" (YLT). This shows us that "amen" has the underlying meaning of "sure, secure, trustworthy, firm, certain, steadfast." This special word was spoken to show emphatic agreement – in the sense of "may it be so" or "yes, I agree!" – but was never used lightly.

This is because the word "amen" also has strong covenantal overtones. It was often used to seal an oath of the highest order, to reinforce statements of serious import, or to make a covenant binding. For example, in **Deuteronomy 27:15**, while reciting the curses of the covenant, Moses declares:

> "Cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol...and sets it up in secret. Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

When the people uttered "amen" to the recitation of the covenantal curses, they were not merely giving assent. They were agreeing that nothing could stop these

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curses coming upon the person who violated God's covenant. They were declaring the serious and unavoidable consequences of any such covenantal violation (see also **Nehemiah 5:12-13**). In their utterance of the word "amen" they were declaring that the curses of the covenant were a foregone conclusion.

But the word "amen" also had richer shades of meaning. It was a word linked to the very character of God himself, who is absolutely "sure," "secure," "firm" and "steadfast." For instance, **Isaiah 65:16** declares:

> "Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth…"

In the original Hebrew, the term "God of truth" is literally "God of the Amen." His character is "amen" and his promises are "amen." In fact, his very nature is everything that the word "amen" represents – totally unshakeable, secure and steadfast. This is why the "amen" is often used after a declaration of God's nature (see **Psalm 31:14; Romans 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16; Jude 25**).

With this divine connection in mind, let's now take a look at how Jesus used this special word. In **Matthew 18:3**, he declares:

> "…I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

The English phrase "I tell you the truth" – also rendered as "Verily I say unto you…" (KJV), "Assuredly I say unto you…" (NKJV), "Truly I say unto you…" (NASB), "I assure you…" (NLT), "I promise you this…" (CEV) – is a translation of a Hebrew/Greek phrase which literally means, "*Amen*, I say unto you…"

The Jews of Jesus' day were familiar with this covenantal usage of the word "amen." But when Jesus appeared on the scene, he used this familiar word in a startlingly unique way. Instead of *finishing* a statement of great import with the word "amen," as was the common practice, he *began* many of his declarations with the word "amen"!

But that's not all! Throughout John's Gospel account, Jesus frequently used the double "amen" format – "*Amen*, *amen*, I say unto you…" – echoing the double "amen" format of passages such as **Psalm 31:14**. This "double amen" is translated in the *King James Version* with the familiar "verily, verily, I say unto you…"

There was no stronger way for Jesus to emphasize the importance of what he was about to say. All Jewish ears tingled when they heard those words. All conversation stopped. All eyes became transfixed on this one who started his teachings with the double "amen," for this usage not only underlined the importance of what Jesus was about to say, it also linked his words to the eternal covenant-making God. No wonder **Mark 1:22** says:

> "The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority…"

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