

IS THE KJV THE BASIS OF A TRANSLATIONAL RUT? Why Modern Versions Must Break Free from Tradition C. Gordon Olson, Th.M., D.Miss.

In my sixty years of dealing with the Greek text of the New Testament, I have discovered over one hundred texts which are significantly mistranslated, not just by one, but by most of the major versions. Most of these can be traced to original mistranslations in the KJV. Despite our far superior knowledge of New Testament Greek today and resources unavailable to the KJV translators, a significant number of mistranslations persist. Most egregious is the rendering of Luke 16:16, but many other examples will be given.

I. LIMITATIONS, OBSTACLES, AND PROBLEMS WITH THE KJV TRANSLATION

Although the KJV was a masterful piece of literature which has dominated the field for almost four centuries, there are many passages in the New Testament alone where the translators totally missed the meaning of the original text. The translators were in the main the best scholars of their day. How could the meaning of the text have been missed so repeatedly? A number of factors must be considered.

The nature of New Testament Greek as being the common (*koine*) language of daily life in the Greek and then Roman empires was not understood until 1824. There were no grammars of the *koine* until 1655 when Georg Pasor published the first credible grammar. In 1815 P. H. Haab published his *Hebrew-Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, the title indicating the total ignorance of the nature of *koine* since they all assumed that the Greek was strongly influenced by Hebrew. Johann Winer's *Grammar* in 1824 was epoch-making, when he adopted and substantiated "the premise that Biblical Greek . . . was not a special 'Holy Ghost' language, nor a conglomerate of Greek words and Semitic grammar, but the ordinary colloquial tongue of the day, spoken throughout the Graeco-Roman world."¹ Apparently there were no lexicons of the *koine* as well. "The first NT dictionary with scholarly pretensions was the *Lexicon Graeco-Latinum in Novum Testamentum* by Georg Pasor, published in 1619."² The first real English lexicon was published by Bishop John Parkhurst in 1769. Thus it is clear that the KJV translators did not know the nature of the language which they were translating and did not have the grammatical and lexicographic tools they really needed. Some of them may have been very conversant with classical Greek, but that was not the language they were translating, either in vocabulary or grammar.

It seems clear that the translators were heavily dependent upon existing Latin translations, especially the Vulgate of Jerome (ca. AD 400), which had dominated Christendom for over a millennium. Erasmus, the Catholic scholar who published the first Greek New Testament, said that "the Vulgate swarmed with errors." One example of the harmful impact of the Vulgate is seen in Jerome's rendering of *proorizein* as *praedestino*, which was transliterated as 'predestinate' in the KJV and 80% of the modern versions. This is a rare word which may be fairly rendered as 'to preappoint' or 'to foreordain,' but not 'to predestinate.' John Calvin's successor in Geneva and father of HyperCalvinism, Theodor Beza, had published a New Testament in Latin, which directly influenced the KJV translators.³ A number of the translators were conversant with the Greek church fathers and there must have been a significant impact of this upon the KJV, for better or for worse.

The Greek texts of the New Testament available to the KJV translators were few and late. Most modern translations are based upon the Nestle-UBS text, which mostly depends upon the oldest manuscripts and the Greek papyri uncovered in the last century. This is one area where modern scholarship has clearly departed from the KJV so it is not a significant factor in the major thesis of this paper.

It must be remembered that the KJV translators were all Anglicans (not a Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, or Mennonite among them). In that day, as today, the Anglican church was doctrinally very diverse. Although Dr. John Rainolds, who first proposed the idea to King James, was a Puritan, it is clear that few with Puritan convictions (perhaps as few as five) were included among the first 45 men appointed to the six committees to do the basic work of translation. The vast majority were high church Anglo-Catholics, many of whom held much of the errors of Roman Catholicism, especially the hierarchy and baptismal regeneration. Those who wanted to purify the church according to the Bible were called Puritans, the majority of whom were probably Calvinists. Some of the high churchmen were also Calvinistic in theology, but probably the majority were Arminian, especially since King James began to favor the Arminians. A joke of the day was the answer to the question, "What do the Arminians hold? Answer: All the best livings (positions) in the church." All were paedobaptists, many holding to baptismal regeneration. Thus Gustavus Paine identified about eight Calvinists and four Arminians, but did not have enough information to identify the soteriology of the rest of the 45 translators and six revisors.⁴ There was a lot of politicking among the translators to get the best church positions, and most were vying to get their doctrinal biases into the resultant translation. All were amillennial, and that bias also greatly influenced the translation process. John Bois of the final revision committee and Bishop Bancroft, who made fourteen unilateral changes in the final draft, were both Arminians.

Another important issue must be raised, the outright persecution of the Puritans in the Anglican church, let alone of the Congregationalists, Baptist, and Presbyterians, and Quakers outside the church. Right in the middle of the translation

process, in December 1606, “Archbishop Bancroft began to proceed against any Puritan clergy who were stubborn, and in a year, some historians say, got rid of three hundred, though others say fewer. In 1607 a number of these men found an alternative: they sailed for Virginia.”⁵ So the founding of Virginia was a consequence of persecution by the man who selected most of the translators. What irony!

Although many of the translators were serious scholars and pious Anglicans, many were involved in a very worldly lifestyle in trying to toady up to the court of King James.⁶ It is fair to say that King James was a godless man and his court was notorious for its favoritism and worldliness. There was a reference to the women in his court being too drunk to dance. Most of the translators drank, but only Richard (Dutch) Thomson can be identified as a drunk, apparently able to translate in the morning after going to bed drunk most nights.⁷

II. MAJOR CONTINUING TRANSLATIONAL ERRORS TRACEABLE TO THE KJV

As stated before, over the years I have identified over one hundred mistranslations in the KJV New Testament which have not been corrected in most of the modern translations. I am working on a book to be entitled, *Crucial Mistranslated New Testament Texts*, in which I give the contextual, lexicographic, and gramatico-syntactic evidence for better renderings for these problem passages. About two-thirds are word-study failures. Despite the vastly superior lexicons and theological dictionaries available today, contemporary translators have not done the in-depth research into the usage of the Greek words necessary to make the corrections. An additional problem is found in the lexicons and theological dictionaries themselves. Geoffrey Bromiley, the translator and editor of the prestigious *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gave a caveat which is of extreme importance: “When this is understood (its place between a simple lexicon and commentaries and biblical theologies), Kittel is safeguarded against the indiscriminate enthusiasm which would make it a sole and absolute authority in lexical and exegetical matters.” It “contains articles of unequal value and varying outlook. Indeed, there are internal disagreements as regards basic presuppositions, historical assumptions and specific interpretations.”⁸ Indeed, Bromiley should have given another more important warning. Most of the authors of the articles did not hold an evangelical view of the inspiration of Scripture; indeed they were beholden to Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis based upon the evolution of religion. This is evident in their articles and has biased both their methodology and their conclusions. I have detected a number of significant methodological errors in the major theological dictionaries.

The most egregious translational error which has not been corrected by any modern translation is Luke 16:16: “**The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.**” This rendering does not make any sense! John the Baptizer had been beheaded previously and now Christ was less than two months from His crucifixion. Most of the modern renderings are like the NIV (Also NAS, NLB, ESV) : “**Everyone is forcing his way into it.**” But in 1861 Van Osterzee’s commentary has the rendering: “**Every man useth violence against it.**”⁹ I had not read that in the 1970s when in teaching the life of Christ I remembered that Dana and Mantey in their Greek grammar referenced a remote mean for the preposition *eis* (normally ‘into’) as ‘against.’ It is used this way in 21 places in the New Testament and 11 of them are in Luke’s writings, obviously a stylistic issue. And the verb, *biazein*, does not just mean ‘force’ but ‘violent force.’ What could be more violent against the kingdom of God than the beheading of the King’s forerunner and the crucifixion of the King Himself. Yet of the eighteen translations I have checked, not one has a glimmer of the truth of Christ’s statement.

If the translators had questioned whether there is any analogy of faith to support their rendering, they would have realized that there is absolutely none. Can people indeed force their way into the kingdom of God? That would be the grossest Pelagianism! Where were all these people trying to force their way in? There is one statement of Christ spoken over a year earlier which used similar vocabulary. In Matthew 11:12 the KJV translates: “**From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.**” At least the first clause is correct, and many modern translations also render it similarly, but wrongly follow the KJV for the second clause. Curiously, the NLB (and others) mangles the first clause by making it positive: “**The kingdom of God has been forcefully advancing. . .**” but gets the second clause correct: “**but violent people attack it.**” Only the TNIV correctly renders both clauses negatively: “**The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people attack it.**” Both the context of John being in prison moving to martyrdom and the force of *biazein* confirm the correctness of the TNIV. A significant number of lexicographers and commentators also take this view. But apparently none of the translators of Luke 16:16 have recognized the connection between the two passages.

One further correction must be made. Neither is it true that “everyone is forcing his way into it” or that “everyone is inflicting violence against it.” The solution is in the BAG lexicon in delineating the many usages of *pas*. For the adjectival use of *pas* with a noun in the singular without an article, they list “*every kind of, all sorts of, for the words pantodapos and pantoios, which are lacking in our lit.*”¹⁰ This seems like a straightforward solution, that the Lord is referring to the diverse people who are hostile to the kingdom—the Jewish leaders, Herod, Pilate, and shortly, Judas Iscariot. Thus I would propose that Luke 16:16 should be rendered: “**All kinds of people are inflicting violence against it [the kingdom of God].**” A full defense of this translation is available on my website: www.mediatheology.org. This is the worst, but I have identified one hundred more such mistranslations.

III. REASONS FOR THE DIFFICULTY IN BREAKING FREE FROM THE RUT

A number of reasons can be given for the failure of modern translators to correct the KJV errors. Certainly there has been undue reverence for the KJV because of the beauty of its language. There really was little competition for three centuries until the Revised Version in the UK and the American Standard Version (1901). These apparently made little impact because of the venerability of the KJV and then in the last century the right wing King-James-only movement based upon the majority Greek text and false concepts of God's providence. The NKJV was an effort on the part of those partial to the majority text to correct some of the obvious errors and obsolete language of the KJV. It seems to have been only partially successful in correcting the errors. Walter Wessel, one of the NIV translators, spoke of the difficulty of breaking free from a traditional mindset, "We were not far into this project before most of us, especially the older members of the group, became keenly aware of how much we had been influenced by the wording of the King James Version. It took considerable effort and much vigilance to purge our minds of its antiquated language."¹¹ But it was not just the language which was the problem, but especially the meaning of the Greek text itself.

There is continued theological bias intruding into the translation process. Just as we saw political and theological infighting in the KJV committees, it is obvious that it has not been politically correct to correct passages which have tremendous doctrinal implications. Even so I cannot understand why translators who believe in eternal security have never corrected John 15:2: "**Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away.**" I remember Louis Sperry Chafer alerting us in class 60 years ago that *airein* does not mean 'to take away,' but rather 'to lift up.' Although he was by no means a Greek scholar, he was absolutely right as a careful word study shows. Many translations have made it worse, 'to cut off' (NIV). The vineyardist is more likely to lift up a fruitless branch off the ground than to hastily cut it off.¹²

Additionally, the rendering of *parapiptein* in Hebrew 6:6 is totally wrong. Apparently there are sixteen different interpretations of this warning,¹³ but the solution to the problem is found in a careful word study of the verb translated 'to fall away,' which was done by Hal Harless by researching the classical, the Septuagint, and the koine. He concluded that it never refers to apostasy such as 'to fall away.'¹⁴ Rather, only the Williams translation correctly has "fallen by the wayside." The noun derived from it, *paraptoma*, means a transgression or fall into sin.¹⁵

On the other hand, it is incredible that the mistranslation of the verb *proorizein* as 'to predestinate' has not been corrected. The KJV translators just followed the Vulgate *praedestino*, by *transliterating* from the Latin, thus coining a new English word. Indeed the KJV translators had a proclivity for transliteration, rather than actual translation of the meaning of key words, such as *baptisma* and *eklektos* (again through the Latin). *Proorizein* is a rare word, only found once in the classical (Demosthenes) and twice in the third-century koine. This group of cognates (*horizein*, *aphorizein*) has nothing to do with destiny, so it should be translated as 'to preappoint' or 'to foreordain.'¹⁶ *Eklektos* has been transliterated as 'elect' 14 times and as 'chosen' 7 times. Since these words (*eklektos*, *eklegomai*, *eklogē*) arose in the classical period when there were democratic elections, there is a more specific reference to choice people elected or appointed to an office. After the demise of democracy, the meaning 'elected' no longer pertained and was used in the koine and the Septuagint of specially appointed or commissioned people, the 'choice ones.'¹⁷ The problem with coined words is that one can read into them any desired meaning. Calvinists have read into 'elect' the doctrine of unconditional election. Of course, 'predestination' retained by 80% of the modern versions strongly confirms that error.

Again, the transliteration of *baptisma* as 'baptism' prejudices the whole issue of the mode of baptism, allowing sprinkling a little water on an infant's head. This was well suited to the Anglican translators, although honesty would have required 'immersion' as the proper rendering. There was little motivation for the KJV translators to get Acts 2:38 right because of their baptismal regeneration view: "**Then Peter said to them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, . . .**". The imperative verb for repentance is in the second person, plural form, while the verb for baptism is in the third person, singular form. Thus there is a sharp break of thought in Peter's words, indicating that repentance and baptism are not coordinate in imperative force. The third person, singular has a cohortative force, which is only recognized by the NKJV, the NAS, and Williams, that is, ". . . **let each one of you be baptized**" (NAS). The KJV rendering of Ananias' words to Saul in Acts 22:16 reinforces this error: "**Wash your sins away, calling on his name.**" We were taught in high-school English class that dangling participles are bad English. But the Greeks loved dangling participles, which in this case has an instrumental force, "**Wash away your sins by calling on His name.**" Only the HCSB and Williams have corrected this!¹⁸ Please see my *Getting the Gospel Right* for details.

It is also revealing that *episkopos* is mostly translated as 'bishop' rather than 'overseer.' This is significant in that scholars are almost unanimous that in the New Testament *episkopos* is used synonymously with *presbyteros*, which is mostly translated as 'elder.' The transliteration of the plural, 'presbytery' only occurs once in the KJV.

My last example relates to the amillennialism of the KJV translators: ". . . **the kingdom of God is within you**" (Luke 17:21). Granted that there is some ambiguity in the Greek, but in 1849 Dean Henry Alford said that this understanding "should have been prevented by reflecting that they are addressed to the *Pharisees*, in whose hearts it certainly was not."¹⁹ The NAS, TNIV, ESV, MLB, and Moffatt have corrected it to: ". . . **the kingdom of God is in your midst**" and the NLB, HCSB, Alford, and Beck have: ". . . **the kingdom of God is among you.**" Thus we suspect that the translators chose the option which suited their amillennial theology (e.g. NIV executive secretary, Edwin H. Palmer).

There has especially been a widespread failure to do adequate in-depth research, especially in word studies. Many times the primary meaning of a word is ignored by the translators. The most outrageous is that the rendering of *genea* as 'generation' in the KJV has not been corrected in any modern translation. **Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away**" (Lk. 21:27-8, 31-3, NIV). The normal rule in translation should be to give preference to the primary meaning of a word unless it clearly does not fit the context, in which case the translator must select a secondary or tertiary meaning. Since none of the lexicons or theological dictionaries list 'generation' as the primary meaning of the word, either in the extra-biblical Greek or in the New Testament, it is clear that serious consideration should have been given to the primary meaning 'race', 'stock', 'family', or 'nation', which makes better sense in the context and in the analogy of Scripture.²⁰ This also avoids the tremendous interpretative and theological problems with the standard rendering.

First, let us note the absolute confusion that this mistranslation has caused. The liberal critics endlessly attack Christ's deity by saying that Christ and the apostles expected His return in one generation and they were obviously wrong. Thus, this mistranslation has raised a serious apologetic problem! The preterist people have tried to resolve it by spiritualizing these events to have taken place with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but since the Lord described His sudden return in graphic language, spiritualization is an improbable solution. Then there was the Jehovah's Witness fiasco of dating Armageddon at 1975 based upon the 'one generation' from 1914. On the other hand, many evangelical commentators and preachers have assumed that 'this generation' means 'that generation' and have come up with a 'terminal generation' notion, which tends to date setting as well. So calculations are made from 1948 or 1967, and at present that 'generation' has pretty well run its course without the return of Christ. This is not to say that they could not be right, but the string of time seems to be running out! Needless to say, such irresponsible date setting has brought the word of God into disrepute, despite Christ's clear warning (Mt. 24:36).

Some in the past have proposed a very simple solution: simply translate *genea* by its primary meaning, 'race' or 'nation.' Thus it would refer to the perpetuation of the Jewish people, which is one of the unique facts of human history and had been promised repeatedly in the Old Testament. What other people has survived for four millennia, despite many Satanic attempts to eradicate them, including not only the holocaust, but also the Arab hatred toward Israel even to the present? This is what was suggested by the distinguished editors of the original *Scotfield Reference Bible* a century ago:

Gr. *genea*, the primary definition of which is, "race, kind, family, stock, breed." (So all lexicons.) That the word is used in this sense here is sure because none of "these things," i.e. the world-wide preaching of the kingdom, the great tribulation, the return of the Lord in visible glory, and the regathering of the elect, occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, A.D. 70. The promise is, therefore, that the generation—nation, or family of Israel—will be preserved unto "these things"; a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day.²¹

Further support for this translation is found in my website, as above.

There has frequently been a failure of perception of the problems presented, especially by the majority of the committee members. Probably one perceptive committee member gets outvoted. William Mounce relates how he and his father were both in an ESV translation committee when the Lord's prayer was discussed. They objected to the traditional, "**Hallowed be Thy name,**" since few young people today would have a clue as to the meaning of 'hallowed.' (Perhaps, conjuring up only Halloween.) The Mounces were outvoted on the basis of tradition.²² One wonders how many other perceptive insights of a minority have been voted down by the majority. My identification of more than one hundred perpetuated mistranslations would indicate many such. Thus, there also seems to be a traditional mind set, which makes it hard to break away from traditional renderings.

There also seems to be a theological insensitivity, a failure to recognize when a rendering causes serious theological problems. This is certainly true with the rendering of *genea* adduced above. As one who has majored in theology and published two books in the field, I am especially sensitive to this. Recently, I was shocked to discover that the obscure rendering of Psalm 2:6, both from the Hebrew and in its New Testament quotations, has been turned into total heresy by many modern translations: "**I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said to me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.**" Although the Apostle Paul interpreted this of the resurrection in his sermon in the Synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:33), theologians for a millennium have used it as the basis of the absurd doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.²³ Obviously Paul understood that the Hebrew *yalad* can not only refer to what the husband does in procreation and what the wife does in child-bearing, but also has a metaphorical meaning, "to bring forth." It can even refer to the work of the midwife. So Paul understood it to be a prophecy of the Messiah being brought forth from the tomb. It has nothing to do with the origin of Jesus Christ since He is eternal! However, the NIV renders the quotation in Hebrews 1:5: "**You are my Son; today I have become your Father.**" Many other versions have followed the NIV in a rendering which is heretical. It denies the eternal sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Finally, we could say there are the financial considerations of translation committees. Bill Mounce recalls that after the ESV committee agreed on a verse, one asked, "'Do you realize that we agreed on a translation that Bob and Bill gave thirty minutes ago except for one word.' Someone else said, 'I wonder how much that word cost?' The publisher, under his breath, said, '\$300.'²⁴ But, is not one word of God's eternal word worth \$300?

CONCLUSIONS

Although we have many good modern versions, we need more competent and courageous Greek scholars who will do the in-depth research necessary to resolve the problem passages. Don Carson shared his perspective on this:

I would . . . suggest that even many teachers of Greek and Hebrew in colleges, seminaries, and universities do not enjoy much facility in the language they are teaching. These are precisely the kinds of people who are least likely to be sensitive to the demands of functional equivalence. . . . To be good translators, they would benefit from further study in linguistics, socio-linguistics, and literary style; but at a guess, advanced competence in the source languages will not prove a hindrance but a strength in most cases, *provided the teacher is aware of linguistic complexities and subtleties that surround translation.*²⁵

Thus, we need translators who are sensitive to the nuances of the syntax and the problems the traditional renderings raise, whether theological, contextual, or in reference to the analogy of other scripture, and are willing to do in-depth word studies by not just superficially trusting the lexicons and theological dictionaries, thus breaking free from a serious translational rut.

1. Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. viii.
2. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *BAG Lexicon*, p. v.
3. Gustavus S. Paine, *The Men Behind the KJV* (G. R.: Baker, 1977; paperback edition of *The Learned Men*, Thomas Crowell, 1959), pp. 77, 114-5.
4. *Ibid*, derived from my tabulation of his account of the translators lives and participation. Richard Baxter, *Catholick Theologie* (London, 1675), p. 22, confirmed that most of the ruling bishops, who persecuted godly, able ministers and serious Christians, were Arminian.
5. Paine, *ibid*, p. 97
6. Baxter, *ibid*, preface, p. b.
7. Paine, *ibid*, pp. 39-40.
8. Geoffrey Bromiley, in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, I:vi.
9. J. J. Van Osterzee, *The Gospel of Luke*, trans. Charles C. Starbuck (New York: Scribners, 1966), p. 252.
10. BAG, p. 636 (also in BDAG, p. 784).
11. Walter W. Wessel, "A Translator's Perspective on Alister McGrath's History of the King James Version," in Scorgie, Strauss, and Voth, eds, *The Challenge of Bible Translation* (GR: Zondervan, 2003), p.199.
12. C. Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right* (Lynchburg, VA: Global Gospel Publishers, 2005), pp. 179-180 ; Joseph Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs: Schoettle, 1992), p. 409.
13. In the ten years I was a Bible answerman on radio WFME (NY, NJ), the most frequent question we got was about Hebrews 6:4-6.
14. Hal Harless, "PARAPIPTO in Hebrews 6" (a paper given at the ETS, San Antonio, TX, Nov. 2004.), pp. 6-15
15. Olson, *ibid*, pp. 170-174.
16. *Ibid*, pp. 267-272.
17. *Ibid*, pp. 274-290. Additional research on the meaning of *eklegomai* will be found in a second edition of my *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism* to be published in 2011-12. This comes from recognition that these words arose from Greek democratic elections. It should also be available on my website: www.mediatetheology.org.
18. *Ibid*, pp. 231-242.
19. Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958 reprint), I: 609.
20. R. Morgenthaler, in *NIDNTT*, II:37,38; Colin Brown in *ibid.*, II: 38.
21. C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (NY: Oxford, 1909), p. 1034, footnote. The consulting editors included the presidents of two seminaries and two Bible institutes.
22. William D. Mounce, *Greek for the Rest of Us* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 38.
23. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., in his *Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, pointed up the absurdity of eternal generation. Walter Martin, a student of Buswell, in his books on Jehovah's witnesses, suggested that this is a far better answer to their heretical misinterpretation than eternal generation of the Son, which is an oxymoron.
24. Mounce, *ibid*, p. 37.
25. D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation" in Scorgie, Strauss, and Voth, eds., *ibid*, pp. 102-103.