

Bible Mistranslations

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | December 4, 2009



Probably the most well known mistranslation in the Bible is that infamous comma in Luke 23:43 (KJV) which says:

And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

SDA's love to say, and rightly so, that there is no punctuation in the original, so it can read and mean differently when the comma is moved to after the word "Today." Do you know of any other such translation misses that can be misunderstood? I would very much like to know if there is and what the correct translation would be.

Thank you, C

I am so glad to see you're thinking and examining the Scripture, searching for the most accurate reading and meaning. You are correct that the Greek has no punctuation, which means the translators have to decide, based on their beliefs, where commas and periods, etc. should go. In the text, you cited

moving the comma changes the entire meaning:

“I say unto you, Today you will be with me in paradise.”

“I say unto you today, You will be with me in paradise.”

How do we know which is the correct reading? From the evidence of Scripture and history. The two thieves had their legs broken as the day ended, because they had not yet died, whereas Jesus was already dead and had no bones broken. What does this mean? The thief didn't die that day, therefore he wasn't in paradise that day. Additionally, Jesus said to Mary on the morning of his resurrection that he had not yet returned to His Father in heaven (John 20:17), which, of course, means that Jesus wasn't in paradise on Friday either. Therefore, the second rendering, in which Jesus made a promise on that day assuring the thief that someday he would be in paradise with Jesus, is the correct rendering.

What about other passages? The first that comes to mind is John 12:32 which reads: But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.

The word “men” is not in the Greek, but is supplied by the translators. However, such a translation narrows Christ's meaning to humans only. The Bible sets a larger view. We see in Job that the unfallen sons of God are watching. 1Corinthians 4:9 tells us that the world is a “theater, a spectacle unto angels as well as men.” And Colossians 1:19, 20 states:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

According to Scripture, heavenly things needed to be reconciled to God through Christ's death on the cross. So, I believe Christ is stating, as the Greek does, that the Cross will be God's method of destroying Satan and sin, not just on earth, but throughout the entire cosmos, ultimately healing the entire universe from the problem of sin!

One of the ways to help minimize such misunderstanding is to check a verse out in multiple translations. In the KJV, NIV, NASB, YLT, and the ASV the word men in John 12:32 is supplied. But the ESV, NCV, NKJV, and NRSV all translate as “will draw all people to myself,” the GNT, Message, and NLT translate as “will draw everyone to myself,” and the Darby translates it as, “I, if I be lifted up out of the earth, will draw all to me.”

So, a problem in one English version is not always a problem in every English version.

Most of the time, with any credible modern translation, there are not “errors” but legitimate differences in interpretation allowed within the meaning of the words. Different translators will pick different words based on their honest understanding of the passage, but their choice could provide subtle changes in the meaning. A great example is Romans 3:25. Here it is first in the NIV:

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.

The key words in this passage are those translated “atonement” and “justice.” In the Greek, the word

translated atonement is the Greek “hilasterion” and is the word for the lid to the Ark of the Covenant. It is translated as atonement or propitiation, but means the place or means whereby God removes sin from sinful mankind and reconciles them to Himself. Thus, atonement understood as at-one-ment is correct, but atonement understood as appeasement is incorrect.

The word translated “justice” is dikaiosune and is the very Greek word translated over 90 times as “righteousness.” Thus the King James version reads as:

Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

Does it read any differently to you when you read “righteousness” versus “justice”? Both are legitimate interpretations of the Greek and in their true meaning mean the same thing as the just action is always the right action. Unfortunately, our language has subtle nuance or connotations which can cause us to draw wrong conclusions. The way we prevent this is to read the Bible as a whole, not one passage here and one passage there, and to compare a lot of different translations together.

I hope this helps. Below is my paraphrase of Romans 3:25:

25 God presented Jesus as the way and means of restoration. Now, through trust established by the evidence of God’s character revealed when Christ died, we may partake of the remedy procured by Christ. God did this to demonstrate he is right and good, because in his forbearance he suspended, for a time, the ultimate consequence of sin and has been falsely accused of being unfair. 26 So, he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so he would be seen as right when he heals those who trust in Jesus.