

CRUCIAL NEW TESTAMENT MISTRANSLATIONS

An Examination of Word-Study Failures By Dr. C. Gordon Olson

Part I: An Examination of Luke's Gospel

Textual Study 2: LUKE 17: 20 - 25

Is the Kingdom visible or invisible?

Current Problematic Rendering:

²⁰Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, ²¹nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."

²²Then he said to his disciples, "The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. ²³Men will tell you, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them. ²⁴For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. ²⁵But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

Suggested Improved Rendering:

Upon being interrogated by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God would come, He replied, "You don't need to investigate the coming of the kingdom of God, nor will people have to say, 'Look here' or 'Look there!' Pay attention, for the kingdom of God is in your midst." Then He told the disciples, "The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man and will not see it. People will say to you, 'Look over here' or 'Look over there!' Don't go to follow it up, for when the Son of Man returns, it will be just as obvious as flashes of lightning which light up the sky from one side to the other.

Analysis

A crucial passage on the timing and nature of the coming of the kingdom of God has been badly obfuscated by mistranslation. When the Lord Jesus was asked by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, the rendering of His answer by all translations has the Lord contradicting Himself. Virtually all translations follow the KJV in Luke 17:20: "**The kingdom cometh not with observation.**" However, this contradicts the two examples that He then gives. The first is in His answer to the Pharisees in 17:21 and is erroneously rendered by the KJV, NIV, NCV, NKJV, and Williams: "**The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you**" (NIV). This is patently absurd since the kingdom was certainly not in hearts of the Pharisees. Therefore, most

other translations have corrected this to “**in your midst**” (NAS, RSV, TNIV, ESV, Moffatt) or “**among you**” (HCSB, NRSV, NLT, Beck), which is grammatically equally viable. The Lord gave the second example only to His disciples afterward:

The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men will tell you, ‘There he is!’ or ‘Here he is!’ Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation [nation]” (Lk. 17:22-25, NIV).

Notice that both examples which He gives make it crystal clear that the kingdom requires the visible presence of the King. To the Pharisees He was saying, “Pay attention! I, the King am standing in your midst.” To the disciples He said in essence, “My return after my passion will be as obvious as a flash of lightning. When people say that I have come back, you will not have to run here and there to investigate their claims.” I propose the following translation:

Upon being interrogated by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God would come, He replied, “You don’t need to investigate the coming of the kingdom of God, nor will people have to say, ‘Look here’ or ‘Look there!’ Pay attention, for the kingdom of God is in your midst.” Then He told the disciples, “The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man and will not see it. People will say to you, ‘Look over here’ or ‘Look over there!’ Don’t go to follow it up, for when the Son of Man returns, it will be just as obvious as flashes of lightning which light up the sky from one side to the other.

1. Ambiguity in 17:21. First, we must clarify the ambiguity in verse 21. Although the grammar of the phrase *entos humon* is ambiguous, the context demands “**in your midst**” or “**among you**.” Henry Alford made that clear a century and a half ago:

The misunderstanding with rendered these words ‘within you’ meaning this in a spiritual sense, ‘in your hearts’ should have been prevented by reflecting that they are addressed to the *Pharisees*, in whose hearts it certainly *was* not. Nor could the expression in this connection well bear this spiritual meaning *potentially* . . . The words are too express and emphatic for this.¹

Another important consideration is the analogy of Scripture. Nowhere else in the Bible is the kingdom said to be ‘in’ anyone. The universal pattern is the reverse. People can enter the kingdom or be in the kingdom, but never is the kingdom some spiritual entity within them. Van Osterzee gave more reasons for this view. He gave other Gospel contexts where Christ is said to be in the midst (Jn. 1:36; 12:35; Lk.7:16; 11:20). He mentioned the need to parallel the two references to His physical presence (17:21 with 17:22-5), and then referenced Meyer as saying that the idea of the kingdom of God as an ethical condition in the soul is modern, not historico-biblical.² Indeed, this is a modern liberal idea foisted upon the Gospels. The obvious point is that the King is standing in the midst of the Pharisees, and because of their unbelief they are not willing to recognize Him as such. Therefore, He prefaced His statement to them with the imperative *idou*, which is “a particle serving to call attention.”³ They needed to pay attention to His claims to be the King, and that the essence of the kingdom is the presence of the King. They would never see or enter the kingdom until they accept their King! This significant correction is important to understanding verse 20.

2. A serious contradiction? How then does the meaning of verse 20 make sense? In all translations it is totally contradictory to the rest of the passage. Since both examples which Christ gave emphasize the clear visibility of the King in His two comings, and thus the visibility of the kingdom, all the current renderings of verse 20 contradict this. All imply that the kingdom comes surreptitiously and cannot be observed! Thus, to resolve the problem we must see if the translation is correct. The problem is caused by the meaning of *meta parate#re#seo#s*. A careful word study uncovers its meaning as not simply ‘observation,’ but ‘investigation,’ which fits with the context of verses 21-25. Let us examine the data.

¹ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 7 editions, 1849-65 (Chicago: Moody, reprint, 1958), I:609.

² J. J. Van Osterzee, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 2nd German ed. (1861), trans. Charles C. Starbuck (1866), p. 266.

³ Samuel Bagster, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon* (London: Bagster, n.d.), p. 199.

3. The meaning of *parate#re#sis*. Contributing to the obscurity of the meaning of *parate#re#sis* is the fact that this is the only place it occurs in the New Testament (a *hapax legomenon*). Thus we must depend upon its usage in the secular Greek and the meaning of the verb from which it is derived, *parate#reo#*. For the usage of the noun in the secular Greek the standard lexicons and the *NIDNTT* are of little help. But Riesenfeld in *TDNT* gives many examples. It is used in the sense of ‘watching,’ ‘lying in wait,’ ‘inquisitive spying,’ ‘critical scrutiny,’ and ‘watching hostages.’ It is especially used of the observations of scientists (astronomy) or physicians, which really implies an ‘investigation.’ Since the noun is not found in the Septuagint, he states, “The interpretation of the verb is important in fixing the sense of *parate#re#sis*.” He gives the secular Greek usage of the verb as: ‘inquisitive attention,’ ‘watching for criminals,’ ‘to lurk, to lie in wait,’ ‘to be on the lookout for omens.’ The Septuagint usage also is ‘to lurk, to lie in wait for.’ The main New Testament usage is ‘to watch lurkingly’ in Mt. 3:2=Lk. 6:7; Lk. 14:1; 20:20; and Acts 9:24.4 It is most significant that all of these are also in Luke’s usage. The LSJ lexicon confirms the classical usage of the verb: “1. to watch closely, observe narrowly, esp. with an evil design, *to lie in wait for*; 2. to observe constantly, take care.”⁵ Moulton and Milligan’s citations of the papyri are supportive of the usage Riesenfeld notes.⁶ Thus, it is very clear that *parate#re#sis* does not refer to mere observation or visibility, but to a very close scrutiny such as a law officer, a doctor, a scientist, or an assassin might do, that is, an ‘investigation.’ Abbott-Smith characterizes much New Testament usage as “to observe scrupulously.”⁷ Five of the six biblical usages have to do with the enemies of Christ and Paul watching to trap or kill them.

4. A better rendering. Although the distinction between ‘observation’ and ‘investigation’ may seem too subtle to some, the actual difference when we come back to Luke 17:20 is vast. It totally reverses the meaning of the verse and brings it in harmony with the patent meaning of the rest of the passage. The Pharisees are really asking how they can recognize the coming of the kingdom. Christ’s response has to be rendered in the light of that question: **“Recognizing the coming of the kingdom of God does not need an investigation. Nor will people say, ‘Look over here, or look over there!’ Pay attention! The kingdom of God is in your midst!”** In His explanation to His disciples about His return after His passion, His words could be paraphrased, “After you have anxiously longed to see My return, and people say that you should run here or there to investigate, don’t do so, since my return will be as obvious as a flash of lightning in the sky.” For example, if someone tells you to check out Rev. Sun Myung Moon in Westchester County as the Messiah, don’t bother to investigate. That is not the way He will return, nor is it the way in which the kingdom will be inaugurated.

5. The analogy of Scripture. The Lord amplified the visibility of His return in the Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24-5=Lk. 21). Also, just before His ascension when the apostles asked Him whether He would now restore the kingdom to Israel, He did not try to correct any misunderstanding they might have had about the nature of the kingdom, but simply said that they didn’t need to know the timing of its inauguration (Acts 1:4-5). If it was begun on the day of Pentecost, He could have simply told them to wait a week. At His ascension the angel told the apostles this same truth: **“This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven”** (Acts 1:11). Paul confirmed the instantaneous, visible, and climatic nature of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and in 1 Corinthians 15:51-2. John describes His second coming to earth in a graphic picture of a King on a white horse leading an army from heaven to earth to destroy the forces of the antichrist (Rev. 19:11-21). That is, He will come bodily, visibly, and manifestly. *No investigation will be required!*

If this is as straightforward as it seems, why have *all the translators* totally missed it? We can understand how the early translators missed it because they did not have knowledge of the usage in the Koine Greek. A major factor may also have been that they held an amillennial or postmillennial view of the return of Christ, and this passage, rightly understood, militates toward premillennialism. Then there is the tradition of translation which makes it hard for committees to change. The NIV committee seemed especially reluctant to correct the rendering of verse 21, and the fact is that the

⁴ Harald Riesenfeld in *TDNT*, VIII:146--51.

⁵ LSJ, p. 1114.

⁶ MM, p. 490.

⁷ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1932), p. 343.

chairman of the committee held an amillennial view. At least the TNIV committee corrected verse 21, and as we have seen, correcting verse 21 is the key to getting verse 20 right.

Then how do we explain the more recent translations' failure to resolve the obvious contradiction between verse 20 and the rest of the passage? Perhaps it is a failure of imagination. More likely it is a failure to check out all the linguistic resources and do a thorough word study of *parate#re#sis*. Granted that most of the lexicons and *NIDNTT* were not helpful, and that the suggestion of 'investigation' is not in the *TDNT* article per se. But the data in that article strongly suggests 'investigation.' *TDNT* is a standard tool and certainly should have been carefully studied by any translator. The examples from the ancient Greek literature are replete and clear. This article has been in English since 1972 for those of us who do not know German.

6. Some implications. Let us draw some conclusions from the correct translation of this passage.

(1) It is clear that the kingdom of God depends upon the personal presence of the King. John the Baptizer and the Lord Jesus had announced the imminency of the coming kingdom for three years. By presenting Himself as Israel's rightful King, He was making a bona fide offer to inaugurate the kingdom as predicted in the Old Testament, full well knowing that He would be rejected. However, He had to give Israel the opportunity. Indeed, He had already begun to give many of the dozen predictions of His own impending passion, which was just a few weeks away. So thus the kingdom as promised in the Old Testament could not be fulfilled at His first coming, but must be put off until His return. This is why kingdom language so prominent for three years of His ministry fades in the last few months, and also in Acts and the epistles. By the Olivet Discourse the kingdom is seen as far future (Lk. 21:31). The six references in the book of Acts can all be understood futuristically. Therefore, main-stream dispensationalists have long held that we are not literally in the kingdom now; there is at present only a "mystery form" or aspect of the future reign of Christ (Mt. 13:11). We are at present citizens of the coming kingdom (Phil 3:20-21), but we are not literally in the kingdom yet. We must understand Paul's reference in Colossians 1:13 to our being translated into the kingdom of His Son as positional truth, which he emphasizes in both Ephesians and Colossians. There is absolutely no other reference to anyone being in the kingdom now in the rest of the epistles. If we are in the kingdom of God now, it was a serious omission of all the apostles in failing to mention that fact. A common error among theologians, ostensibly derived from Joachim Jeremias and commonly attributed by its proponents to George E. Ladd, is that the kingdom is "already, not yet."⁸ Such paradoxical word games are not necessary to understand the whole of the biblical picture. There can be no kingdom without the King!

(2) We should note that the coming of the kingdom of God will be long delayed. This is implied in His reference to having to suffer and be rejected by His own nation before He can return as visibly as a flash of lightning (17:24-5). A few weeks later just before the final ascent to Jerusalem He confirmed this: "Jesus went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. So He said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return'" (19:11-12). The parable makes it clear that Christ would have to go to heaven for a significant time period before He could return to earth to reign. Verse 11 makes it clear that He is correcting their misconception that the kingdom would appear immediately.

(3) His return and the inauguration of the kingdom will be sudden, visible, and cataclysmic, not gradual and surreptitious. This is a reaffirmation of a main point of Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the stone cut without hands (Christ) smashing the multimetallic image and becoming a mighty mountain filling all the earth (the kingdom of God, Dan. 2:34-5, 44-45). It happens cataclysmically, not surreptitiously. This parallels Daniel's vision of the slaying of the four beasts by the coming of the Son of Man from heaven to receive the kingdom (Dan. 7: 11-14).

⁸ I have heard a number of proponents attribute this to Ladd, but am unable to document this expression from his *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), although it does seem to be a fair representation of his position (cf. pp. 68-69).