

How to study the Bible: Translation

Last week we looked at how important it is to be aware of the context of a given passage, both its context within the Bible and the social, cultural, geographic, and historic contexts. Who wrote it? when? to whom? and for what purpose? are all important questions to help establish context.

Today we'll look at translation issues. Not only will we compare various English translations of our selected passage, the Beatitudes, but we'll also take a look at individual words in the original Greek text. Such word studies can be helpful to sort out why different translators may have taken the approach they did, and can often provide insight into the original text that is very enlightening.

The cure for boredom is curiosity, there is no cure for curiosity .-- Dorothy Parker

Let's start with a horrible, but (almost) plausible, mistranslation of the first of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the windy beggars because they will take ownership of heaven itself!” How on earth did I arrive at such a mangled mess?

We'll ignore for now the first two words and focus on the phrase “poor in spirit”, which is used by nearly all the English translations. What does that mean? Surely it describes me: all my life I have thought of myself as being poor, definitely not part of the middle class or the wealthy, but when I apply for government assistance they tell me I have too much income -- I am poor, at least in spirit, regardless of what the government bureaucracy says.

Let's look at the Greek text: “πτωχοί τῷ πνεύματι”.

- πτωχοί (ptochoi): one who crouches or cringes, a beggar; beggarly, poor in
- τῷ (to): therefore, in this wise, thereupon; who?, some one
- πνεύματι (pneumati): a blowing, a wind, blast; breathed air, breath; spirit, inspiration

Okay, with that bit of word study behind us, let's try again: what idea(s) does “poor in spirit” convey to us?

Here are some of the possibilities that came to my mind:

1. windy beggars (I admit that's absurd, but you should be able to see now how it was derived)
2. beggars who are spiritual
3. people who have the spirit of beggars: humility, deference, fear
4. beggars with spirit: “go team, go!”
5. spiritual beggars -- the spiritually impoverished (the downtrodden, hopeless, or oppressed, with no hope of redemption by their own merit)

Which one did Jesus mean? Keeping in mind that ambiguity is sometimes deliberately intended, I'd suggest some combination of 3 and 5.

Moving on to “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”, in Greek: “αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν”.

- αὐτῶν (auton): self, myself, thyself; oneself, one's true self, the soul, not the body; of oneself, of one's own accord; by oneself, alone; he, she, it;
- ἐστὶν (estin): to be, to exist;
- ἡ (h): which way, where, whither, in or at what place;
- βασιλεία (basileia): a kingdom, dominion; [NET: royal power, kingship, dominion, rule]
- τῶν (ton): the, that;
- οὐρανῶν (ouranon): the vault or firmament of heaven, the sky;

In what sense might it be said that the kingdom of heaven “belongs to” the poor in spirit? Might it better be said that they belong **in** or **to** the kingdom?

The first two words of the Greek text are “μακάριοι οἱ”:

- μακάριοι (makarioi): blessed, happy; prosperous;
- οἱ (oi): he, she, they;

Can we, as untrained laypersons, make our own good translations of sacred scripture from the original texts? Can we gain valuable insights by conducting our own investigations of the original texts (word studies)? Can we avoid errors by comparing several good English translations?

<<http://classic.net.bible.org/>> -- The most versatile Bible study site.

<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?la=greek>> -- Detailed (secular) word studies.

<<http://jdcard.com/BibleStudy.html>> -- My own list of study tools.

Next week: The Beatitudes: Commentaries