

A TRANSLATOR'S HANDBOOK ON THE LETTERS OF JOHN

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This article is a section of a draft of a Translator's Handbook on the Letters of John. It is being published in TBT at the suggestion of the editor in order to give readers of TBT an opportunity to study it and to provide suggestions to the authors. The biblical text is the RSV and the notes at the end are taken from notes in the draft which occur in other parts where these particular words are found.

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(Editor)

1 John 2:12-17 "What Christians have and what they should avoid"

Whereas in the two preceding sections John has been refuting the propositions of the false teachers, in this section he addresses the true believers, first (vv. 12-14) giving them an affirmation of the blessings they have received, next (vv. 15-17) exhorting them not to love the world. One can either take the exhortation as the principal part of this section and vv. 12-14 as an introductory remark containing the basis of the exhortation, or view the two parts as of equal importance, giving the positive and the negative application of what precedes. The latter interpretation is probably to be preferred, since it more fully does justice to the antithetical character of vv. 12-14 (for which see below).

12. I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake. 13. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. 14. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

These verses form the counterpart of the preceding section: there remarks are made about the situation the false teachers are in, here about the situation of the Christians. Some terms and themes of vv. 1:5-2:11 have their echo here, compare e.g. 2:12 with 1:7, 9 and 2:2; 2:14^a with 2:3 and 4; and the last clause of 2:14^c with 1:10. The verses are couched in an "almost poetical form, consisting of two sequences of three aphorisms, with a strongly marked rhythm and parallelism (not, however, the distinctively Hebraic kind of parallelism familiar to us from the Old Testament)" (Dodd, 37). In the first

sequence (vv. 12-13^b) the introductory verb is in the present tense, in the second sequence (vv. 13^c and 14 = v. 14 in the Bible Societies' Greek New Testament) in the aorist, a variation which is probably used for reasons of style, not meaning. To bring out the parallelisms and other formal details the text may be rewritten as follows.

- (v. 12) "I am writing to you, little children,
that your sins are forgiven for his sake.
(v. 13^a) I am writing to you, fathers,
that you know him who is from the beginning.
(v. 13^b) I am writing to you, young men,
that you have overcome the evil one.
(v. 13^c) I write to you, children,
that you know the Father,
(v. 14^a) I write to you, fathers,
that you know him who is from the beginning.
(v. 14^b) I write to you, young men,
that you are strong, and
the word of God abides in you, and
you have overcome the evil one."

Little children, preferably, '(my) dear children', see on v. 1¹. The group addressed can best be taken to comprise the congregation as a whole, not a certain age-group. A positive argument for this interpretation is the use in v. 1, a negative one is that, if an age-group parallel to the "fathers"¹ and the "young men" had been intended, one would expect another sequence, viz. children—young men—fathers.

Because, here and in the five next sentences preferably 'that'. Greek *hoti* can mean the one or the other, but 'that' seems to be more probable, because John is stressing some vital truths of Christian life; to do so he can better be seen as repeating what he has said than as saying why he has said it.

Your sins are forgiven, see on 1:7 and 9², indicating a situation in the present that is the result of an event or act in the past; hence, in the perfect tense. The implied agent is God, not Christ.

For his sake, lit. 'for the sake of his name' (Gr. *dia to onoma autou*). The pronoun refers to Jesus Christ; hence e.g. 'on Jesus Christ's account'. Since the name stands for the person and all he did, one may also say, 'because of (or, thanks to) what Jesus Christ did'. A literal rendering of 'name' is to be avoided in most receptor languages, because it would make the expression unintelligible, and/or would be misleading, e.g. suggesting that the pronouncing of Jesus Christ's name had a magic effect.

(v. 13^a) *Fathers*. Having spoken to the congregation as a whole, John now proceeds to address two age-groups, here the older, in v. 13^b the younger generation. The same triplet is to be found in vv. 13^c, 14^a, 14^b. In some languages the term 'fathers' can be used in the expanded sense required here; where this is not the case, one must render the term by 'old(er) ones', 'elders', 'you who are already old', etc.

¹ In this article quotations from English are in double quotes. Quotations from other languages, translated more or less literally into English, and comparable cases are in single quotes.

Him who is from the beginning is an allusion to the Word which from the beginning was with God and has now appeared in the person of Jesus Christ, see on 1:1, and cp. John 1:1. The masculine article in the Greek phrase (*ho ap'archēs*, lit. 'the from beginning') refers to Jesus Christ; the reference should, however, not be made explicit in the translation unless this is strictly required by idiom. On the other hand, the translator should make fairly clear that the reference is not to a thing or situation, but to a person. In one Philippine language, for instance, this is done by using for "know" a verbal form that only takes a person as its object.

(v. 13^b) *Young men* (Gr. *neaniskoi*), or 'young people'. The term refers to persons who, no longer adolescents, stand at the beginning of adulthood, in the transitional period before they are fully settled; roughly, "in their twenties". The connotation is that of the freshness and vigour that is inherent in youth (cp. 14^b). In some versions the rendering used is even derived from a word for strength or vigour, e.g. in one American Indian language where the word for 'young men' lit. means 'those who-have-become-strong'. Terms for 'young men' often also have the implication of being marriageable but as yet still unmarried, but this component of meaning is not of relevance here; hence a rendering primarily meaning 'bachelor' is not advisable.

You have overcome the evil one is in the perfect tense; the victory can be envisaged as a fact now since Jesus Christ conquered the devil (cp. 4:4, 5:4f), but John and his readers are fully aware of the fact that their struggle with the evil one is still going on.—*You have overcome*. The verb (Gr. *nikaō*) has been rendered also by 'to defeat/master/subdue', 'to be stronger, or, more than'.—*The evil one* (Gr. *ho ponēros*; also in v. 14; 3:12; 5:18, and perhaps 5:19), or, 'who is the embodiment of evil', 'the bad owner', i.e., the one who is characteristically bad (both renderings chosen to reinforce the expression and thus to prevent it being taken as simply a reference to a bad person), 'the evil-doer'. Since the expression serves as an appellation of the opponent of God and Christ (cp. e.g. Matt. 13:19), i.e. the devil, the normal rendering of this latter term (see on 3:8) may be substituted, where a more literal rendering would not have the required connotation. Cp. also *A New Testament Wordbook for Translators* 43/26, DEVIL.

(v. 13^c) *Children* (Gr. *paidia*) is synonymous here with "little children" (*teknia*) in v. 12, which see.

You know the Father. The clause is the counterpart of v. 12^a: forgiveness of sins because of Christ opens the way to the knowledge of God.—*For the Father* see on 1:2⁸.

(v. 14^b) *You are strong* (Gr. *ischuros*), cp. the exhortation in Eph. 6:10. The reference is not, of course, to physical strength; this may have to be made explicit, e.g. by saying 'having strength of heart', or by choosing an adjective that restricts the reference to character and spirit, such as 'courageous', 'steadfast'. Cp. also *A Translator's Handbook on Luke* on 2:40.

The word of God abides in you, i.e. 'is constantly in you (or, in your heart/thought)' cp. on v. 6. It may be idiomatically desirable to take the persons as subject, cp. e.g. 'you take-to-heart the word of God, or, what God has said,' 'you have put/guarded/kept/observed the word of God in your heart.'

15. Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. 16. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. 17. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever.

This second part of the section hinges on the right understanding of the connotation of *the world* (Gr. *kosmos*), a term that occurs frequently in the New Testament in general and in the Johannine writings in particular (103 occurrences out of a total of 183), and is used with various shades of meaning. Five of these should be mentioned here, (1) the world in the sense of the (orderly) universe, the system of the physical creation (e.g. Acts 17:24, and probably John 21:25); (2) locative, the earth, as the habitation of mankind, and the place of man's organization in the creation where God is at work, sending his Son (1 John 4:9), and where men should serve God (3:17; 4:17), but where evil forces are at work too (4:1,3; 2 John 7); (3) personal, mankind itself (1 John 2:2; 4:14, cp. also John 3:16); (4) a metaphorical extension of the second meaning, referring to man's organization in the creation, or his way of life, with its possessions, joys, desires, cares and sufferings. In itself the term can be said to have an essentially neutral connotation in these occurrences. But being the place of evil forces, 'the world' can also occur (5) with a negative connotation, standing for that which is in enmity with God and the believers; the evil system, which has been overcome by the Son of God, and should be overcome by his followers; a way of life that is in the power of the evil one, and therefore friendly to the false teachers (see 2:15-17; 3:13; 4:4f; 5:4f,19). Then the opposition of 'world' and 'God' is parallel to that of 'darkness' and 'light', cp. on 1:5. This is the meaning the term has in the present verses.

In practical usage these meanings are, of course, not so neatly divided as is done here, for there is a certain inner unity between all or most of them; hence overlappings and transitions, with the result that where one of these meanings is predominant, one or more of the others may not be entirely absent, though only in undertone. Translators, therefore, have the delicate task to find renderings that bring out (at least, do not obscure) the specific shade of meaning relevant in the context, at the same time trying to preserve the inner unity of the term (at least, not to differentiate more than is strictly required by idiom). To do so it is sometimes possible to use one term with different qualifications according to context, such as 'the earth/world' (or more poetically, 'the ring of the earth', as one Indonesian language has it) for meaning (2) and, metaphorically used, for meaning (4); 'those who are in (or, people in) the earth/world' for (3); 'the evil/godless earth/world', or 'the evil/godless persons, or things in, or way of life on earth, or, in this world', for (5). If the pejorative connotation is clear from the context, as often is the case, there is no need to make it explicit; if it is not clear, its marking is essential for the understanding of the message. Another way to do so, less outspoken than the one just mentioned, is to say, 'this (here) earth/world' (tacitly implying a contrast to another and better one), 'only the world'. In some languages it is the derived adjective that has a pejorative

connotation rather than the noun, e.g. in English, Dutch and some Indonesian languages.

Do not love. The verb (Gr. *agapaō*, as in v. 10) is here used with a non-personal object in the sense of 'to strive after', 'to try to get' (cp. "love the best seat in the synagogues", Luke 11:43); then, 'to prefer', in the sense of 'to like better than the things of God' (cp. "men loved darkness rather than light", John 3:19). Therefore one often must use another rendering than in v. 10 (cp. also v. 5), e.g. 'to hanker after', "to give the heart to" (Phillips), "to set the heart on" (NEB), 'to let the heart be taken up with', 'to desire' (lit. "to have a bursting heart"), 'to covet' (lit. 'to become small of heart', whereas the language concerned uses 'he who feels hurt in his heart for his brother' in v. 10).

The world or the things in the world, or 'the world and what is in it, or, what it offers'.

The *if*-clause states that love for the world and love for God are incompatible (cp. Phillips' "a man cannot love the Father and love the world at the same time"), and thus expresses the first reason for the preceding exhortation not to love the world (the second reason being given in v. 17). Cp. also James 4:4, on "friendship with the world" as against "enmity with God".

Love for the Father is not in him is a more expressive way of saying 'he cannot love the Father'. The Greek phrase is then taken as an objective genitive, the most obvious interpretation in this context, although the subjective interpretation is not to be wholly excluded (cp. 4:19). Some translators feel that this ambiguity is probably intended; therefore they prefer a reciprocal translation, e.g. 'there can be no love between God and men' (Today's Dutch Version). Another possibility is an interpretation as qualitative genitive (see on 2:5). A rendering exclusively reflecting the interpretation as subjective genitive is not advisable.

(v. 16) The verse serves to answer the question why one cannot love the world and love God at the same time.

All that is in the world takes up, and is virtually synonymous with, "the things in the world" (v. 15), *all* (Gr. *pan*) emphasizing its collectivity. The three following phrases are not an exhaustive enumeration, but are given by way of characteristic examples.

The lust of the flesh, or, 'what the flesh lusts after, or, desires', since the second noun refers to the subject. The expression includes sexual desires and sensuality, but its contents is not restricted to this, as is shown, e.g. by Gal. 5:13-26.—*Lust.* The Greek term (*epithumia*) may have the meaning of 'longing', but is often used, as is the case here, in a pejorative sense, 'sinful desire', 'to desire what is unlawful'; cp. *A New Testament Wordbook for Translators*, 42f/25f, DESIRE.—*Flesh* (Gr. *sarx*), again a term with various shades of meaning, (1) the soft substance of which the body is composed (e.g. Luke 24:39); (2) body (e.g. Acts 2:26,31; Heb. 9:10; 1 Pet. 4:1^b); (3) man, cp. 'all flesh' in the sense of 'all men' (e.g. Luke 3:6); (4) the physical, corporeal nature and existence of man, with all restrictions inherent in the fact that it is "only human" (e.g. Phil. 1:22,24; John 1:14; 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7); and (5) human nature and existence as ruled by sin and bearing the consequences of sin (e.g. Rom. 8:5).

Here, again, in view of existing overlappings and transitions between the various shades of meaning the use of one rendering in all contexts would be the ideal solution, and is actually attempted, in several older and some modern versions. Such consistency, however, is as a rule not compatible with demands of meaningful translation. A translator may be able to use a consistent rendering in one receptor language, but be forced to differentiation in a related language (as is shown in *TBT*, 3.206, 1952). On the other hand one should not differentiate and specify more than is needed to be meaningful and idiomatic.

Renderings of (4) and (5), for instance, can often coincide, especially in passages where the negative connotation of (5) is clear from the context, as is the case here when Gr. *epithumia* is rendered by a term with pejorative connotation. Some renderings used for (4) are, 'body', 'the self', 'human/physical nature', 'what is-human (lit. is-like-man-on-earth)'. These may be negatively qualified for (5), e.g. "the sinful self" (TEV), 'man's evil nature', "baser human passion", etc. Cp. also Nida, *Bible Translating*, 152-154; *TBT*, 3.137f, 204-212, 1952; 4:136, 1953; 9:12 and 55, 1958; 12.17f, 37, 1961. In the context of the present verse the term can sometimes be rendered by the word that is normally used to refer to man's emotional centre, e.g. 'heart', 'head-heart', etc. (cp. also *A Translator's Handbook on Mark* on 14:38), or, 'sinful/evil heart', if the negative connotation must be made explicit. In some other languages idiom does not require a term like 'self', 'heart', etc., as a reference to the subject of lust or desire, cp. such renderings as "all that panders to the appetites" (NEB), 'all that arouses lust', 'bad desires'.

The lust of the eyes, or, 'what the eyes lust after, or, desire'. By adding this phrase John emphasizes that man's desires are aroused chiefly by what he sees, cp. such passages as 1 Kings 20:6 ("whatsoever is pleasant in thine eyes" in AV, "whatever pleases them" in RSV); Prov. 27:20; Eccles. 2:10; 4:8, referring to desire and greediness in general, and Matt. 5:29; 2 Pet. 2:14, cp. Gen. 39:7; Job 31:1, referring to sexual desire. If a shift from noun to verb is required another subject may have to be used, cp. e.g. 'what people want because (or, when) they see it', "what people see and want" (TEV), 'what one cannot keep one's eyes from' (Today's Dutch Version), 'their hearts are taken up . . . with what looks nice to their eyes'. In some cases, again, the subject of desire is not expressly indicated and the whole phrase rendered by 'greedy ambitions' (Phillips), or, 'greediness'.

The pride of life. *Pride* (Gr. *alazoneia*) refers primarily to the behaviour of "a conceited, pretentious humbug" (Dodd, 42); hence renderings such as 'bragging', 'boasting', "proud display" (Goodspeed), 'making oneself big'. *Life* (Gr. *bios*) is here used in the sense of what one needs to sustain life (cp. "living", in Mark 12:44), then 'property', 'possessions', 'riches'. The genitive construction may be taken as objective (cp. "everything . . . that people are so proud of", TEV), or subjective (cp. 'riches which cause people to boast'), preferably the latter, in accordance with the interpretation of the two preceding genitives.

Is not of the Father but is of the world. For "of the Father" cp. "of God" in John 7:17; 8:47; 1 John 3:10; 4:1-4, 6f; 5:19; 3 John 11; for "of the world" see also John 8:23; 15:19; 17:14, 16; 18:36; 1 John 4:5. The preposition

(Gr. *ek*) indicates origin, here probably quality as it is determined by origin. Hence, the sentence may be rendered, 'does not have the quality/character of the Father (or, belong to the Father), but has the quality of the world (or, belongs to the world, or, is worldly)', 'has nothing to do with the Father, but has everything to do with the world'.

(V. 17) *The world passes away, and the lust of it* expresses the second reason for the exhortation given in v. 15^a.—*Passes away* has durative aspect (cp. v. 8): the event has begun, still continues, and is not yet completed. The verb may also be rendered 'is ending', 'is coming to its end', 'is perishing' 'is not going on to exist'.—*The lust of it*, briefly resumes the three phrases of v. 16. The genitive construction may be taken as objective, cp. "everything in it that men desire" (TEV), or subjective, cp. 'the desires it (or, the world) arouses' (Bonnard); the latter is probably to be preferred, because of the interpretation of the genitives in v. 16. It is sometimes necessary to transpose the phrase, 'the world and its lust pass away', or to supply a verb, either the preceding one or a synonym of it, e.g. 'and the lust of it is passing away, or, is disappearing/perishing'.

To do the will (Gr. *thelēma*) of God is a Hebraistic expression (occurring also in Matt. 7:21; 21:31, and, applied to Jesus, in John 4:34; 6:38f, and cp. "seek the will of . . ." in John 5:30), used in the sense of, 'to act according to God's will', 'to do what God wants/demands, or, what God tells/commands one to do'. Some idioms used are, 'to follow God's heart', 'to do the thing-loved by God'.

Abides for ever, or "lives for ever" (TEV), is the opposite of "passes away", and expresses the sharing in the divine life (cp. John 8:35 and 12:34, where it is said of Christ). *For ever* (Gr. *eis ton aiōna*; cp. on "eternal" in 1:2), i.e., until the age to come, which is without end, and has the quality of permanence, cp. 'lives/remains for all times', 'is part of the permanent and cannot die' (Phillips).

Notes

1. The note on 2:1 says, *My little children* (Gr. *teknia mou*), preferably 'my dear children', since the diminutive form expresses intimacy rather than age. The vocative is sometimes to be explicitly marked, e.g. by preposing 'you' (plural), or an exclamatory particle. The Greek noun primarily refers to descent rather than to age (cp. *Translator's Handbook on Luke* on 1:7), and is often applied metaphorically to a person's spiritual children, e.g. by Jesus (John 13:33), or by an apostle or elder (here and 2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21; cp. also *tekna* in 3 John 4). The phrase is to be rendered by a friendly and intimate form of address, used in the receptor language by a teacher towards his pupils, or in general by one old and wise towards people, not necessarily of a younger generation, who are in need of his advice. Some versions have felt that the metaphorical use should be marked, and/or have rendered the vocative as a statement, e.g. 'you are as if you were my own children, therefore I am writing to you'.

2. The note on 1:9 says: The term for *to forgive* (Gr. *aphienai*) may require another syntactic construction in the receptor language, e.g. 'he will forgive

us (as to) our sins', 'he will forgive (us) the sins we did', or simply, 'he will forgive us', leaving the reference to sin to be supplied from what precedes. For the rendering of this verb see *A New Testament Wordbook for Translators* 66f/39f; *Translator's Handbook on Mark* on 1:4. As compared with 'to cleanse', the verb expresses that sin and the resulting guilt are no longer taken into account ('are no longer seen', as some languages render it), just as is the case with debts that have been cancelled (cp. Luke 7:42f, 47f).

3. The note on 1:2 says: *The Father* (here and in 1:3; 2:1, 14ff, 22ff; 3:1; 4:14; 2 John 3f, 9) refers to God, the heavenly Father of Jesus and of men. This reference may have to be made explicit, e.g. 'Father God', 'the Father above'; languages having honorific forms use those that are reserved for the deity. If the word for 'father' is obligatorily possessed, one has the choice between 'his father', i.e. the father of Jesus Christ, and 'our (inclusive) father'. The latter is preferable (provided this does not obscure the fact that God is 'our Father' because he is Jesus' Father), but special attention is required then in languages that use honorifics, because normally a speaker does not use such reverential forms when speaking of his own father. Often the noun may best be treated as a proper name, e.g. by adding a name qualifier. For the rendering of 'father' in this sense, cp. also *TH-Lk.* on 'my father' in 2:49 and references; for problems encountered in matrilineal societies cp. *N.T. Wb.*/33f.