

No Small Difference? Galatians 4.1 and the Translation of Διαφέρει

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Abstract

This article argues on the basis of semantic and syntactical observations that the verb διαφέρω in Gal 4.1 is best translated as “be superior to” (rather than “be different from”). An alternative is proposed for the most prevalent translation of the verb in contemporary editions of the Bible and commentaries on Galatians alike.

Keywords

Galatians 4.1, Greek grammar, translation, διαφέρω

Introduction

Routinely, those commenting on Gal 4.1 or translating it favour a translation of διαφέρει as “he is different from” (most translations and commentaries)¹ or as “he is better than” (NRSV, representing a minority).² Incidentally, the use of διαφέρω is seen as deserving interpretation in terms of a hyperbole,

¹ For studies translating it as “differs from,” see de Boer 2011, 251; Burton 1921, 211; Schlier 1965, 188; Rohde 1989, 153; Lührmann 1978, 68; Vouga 1998, 97; Martyn 1998, 384, 387. In their *Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, Arichea and Nida opt for the translation “is treated just like a slave” (1975, 86–87). Goodrich does not consider the translation of διαφέρει in any detail (2010, 251–84, esp. 253). This also applies to Byron 2003.

² Translations that prefer “differs from” include: the Dutch SV (1637), NBG 1951, WV (1995), the German EU (1980), the English NJB (1985), NAB (1970), KJV, and many others, constituting the overwhelming majority of current translations, including the Vulgate.

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given that there must be *some* difference between children and slaves (Longenecker 1990, 160, 162). While there are certainly good reasons for such a translation, and both of these options represent possible meanings of the verb διαφέρω, here it will be argued that a translation (always, of course, including elements of interpretation) of διαφέρει in terms of “being superior to someone” is preferable. Reasons for this have to do with the various possible meanings of the verb in question, as well as with the syntax of Gal 4.1 and its content, and these reasons will be discussed in sequence.

Possible meanings of διαφέρω in the New Testament

When consulting the standard dictionaries of New Testament and early Christian Greek, the verb διαφέρω can be seen to have a number of meanings; as most words, it is polysemous and the meaning that it carries is determined by its context.³ The sense that this composite verb carries most often is “to carry through,” derived from the meaning of διά and φέρω, and it occurs with this meaning, for example, in Mark 11.16 (διενέγκη). A related meaning “to spread” can be found in Acts 13.49 (διεφέρετο), while the movements of a ship adrift are described with a form of διαφέρω in Acts 27.27. In a more figurative sense, and combined with a noun in the genitive case, διαφέρω can mean “to differ” or “to be different from” in texts such as 1 Cor 15.41 (ἀστὴρ γὰρ ἀστερός διαφέρει ἐν δόξῃ).⁴ The meaning “be superior to” is appropriate as a more specific translation of the basic meaning of διαφέρω in terms of “being different” in a number of cases in which the difference has to do with status, as indicated by the context of the verb’s use. In such a case a translation indicating superiority of status is preferable to the more bland “be different from.” Cases include Matt 6.26, where the question of the superiority of the humans being addressed by Jesus, compared to the birds of the heavens, is the main point of his comparison. Similarly, in Matt 10.31, a translation of πολλῶν στρουθίων διαφέρετε ὑμεῖς as “you are different from many sparrows” would miss the mark, unlike a translation that underlines the superiority in terms of status or worth of Jesus’ audience when compared to sparrows. This also applies to the same sparrows in Luke 12.7 and the ravens in Luke 12.24 (both texts are parallels to the two Matthean texts just mentioned). Precisely the same figure of speech occurs

³ For this and the following, see Louw and Nida 1989; BDAG; LSJ.

⁴ Thayer’s lexicon of 1890, on the other hand, notes for both this occurrence and Gal 4.1 the meaning “to excel, to surpass one.” Similarly, the (papyri-based) Moulton and Milligan lexicon of 1915 notes that the meaning “surpass” or “excel” is “common in the NT,” but neither seems to have had much influence on extant translations of Gal 4.1.

in Matt 12.12, where the object of comparison, incidentally, is a sheep. In fact, in every other instance of the use of the verb διαφέρω with the genitive in the New Testament, besides Gal 4.1, the meaning is clearly “to be superior to.” This leaves Gal 4.1 in most translations to be the odd one out—and therefore suspicious. To return to Paul, it can be noted that, besides Gal 4.1, he also uses the expression τὰ διαφέροντα in Rom 2.18 and Phil 1.10, a use of the verb διαφέρω which goes far beyond indicating that one thing differs from another. The expression τὰ διαφέροντα rather indicates “things that really matter,” that is, things that are not only different from one another, but in fact are of superior importance when compared to others.

On this basis, it can be established that, while διαφέρω can have a number of meanings, all are based on its fundamental meaning of creating a difference, or of being different. It can also be established that, in a number of cases, including cases found in Paul’s own letters, the meaning of the term is “to be superior to” as a specific way of being different. The context determines which of the possible meanings of the verb ought to be preferred when translating it. Therefore it is now possible to consider Gal 4.1 and the use of διαφέρω there in more detail, with a specific focus on syntax and conceptual content.

The syntax and content of Gal 4.1 and the interpretation of διαφέρει

Galatians 4.1 is one half of a longer sentence that runs through the first two verses of the chapter. In its entirety (following the text of NA²⁸), it reads, Λέγω δέ, ἐφ’ ὅσον χρόνον ὁ κληρονόμος νηπιός ἐστιν, οὐδὲν διαφέρει δούλου κύριος πάντων ὧν, ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους ἐστὶν καὶ οἰκονόμους ἄχρι τῆς προθεσμίας τοῦ πατρὸς. The main structure of the sentence consists of the contrast between its first part (v. 1) and its second part (v. 2), indicated by the adversative particle ἀλλά at the beginning of v. 2. Of primary interest here is the sentence’s first part, now Gal 4.1, which consists of an introduction (λέγω δέ) and the bipartite statement ἐφ’ ὅσον . . . πάντων ὧν. Of this, the first part of the bipartite statement is of concern for the interpretation of διαφέρει. At first glance, an interpretation in terms of “being different from” seems possible, but a closer look will indicate that an interpretation in terms of “being superior to” is more precise and satisfactory. There are two primary reasons for this.

First, the structure of the clause οὐδὲν διαφέρει δούλου κύριος πάντων ὧν needs to be considered. To begin with, it can be argued that it is constructed as a chiasm (a: οὐδὲν διαφέρει; b: δούλου—b’: κύριος; a’: πάντων ὧν), which leads to a contrast between the slave and the lord. While οὐδέν

and πάντων fulfil different functions in the sentence, they nonetheless also contrast with each other. Even if one would be hesitant to identify this as a chiasm (chiasms are often debatable and this one is no exception), the placement of δούλου κύριος at the centre of the clause and in such a way that these two concepts end up next to each other is remarkable. This is the case especially because another sequence of the various parts of this clause can be imagined without great difficulty, but as a result the contrastive pairing of “slave” and “lord” would disappear. In other words, the pairing of the two nouns now at the centre of the clause seems to be intentional. Whereas the structure of the sentence as such does not necessarily say much about the precise interpretation of the words used in order to construe it, the contrastive pairing of δούλος and κύριος (πάντων) does give rise to the question of what sort of difference is indicated by their use and, especially, their placement in the sentence. With or without a chiasm, the structure of the clause and the positioning of the two nouns at its centre are food for thought, given that together they underline a contrast. This brings one to the second consideration, that of the content of the contrast constructed through the precise phrasing of this part of Gal 4.1.

When considering the contrast between δούλος and κύριος (πάντων), in the context of which the concept of δούλος is also associated with the word οὐδέν (even if it has an adverbial, not adjectival, function in the sentence), which enhances the contrast, the question arises whether a translation of the predicate διαφέρει with “differs from” is satisfactory. To be sure, the difference at stake is not the one between slave and master, but the difference between heir and slave. This difference, in fact, in a Greco-Roman context, is much smaller than the difference between master/lord and slave. Thus, Paul enhances the difference between being “lord over all” hyperbolically and being the heir by equating the latter to a slave in terms of status (see Longenecker 1990, 160, 162). This is emphasized by the use of οὐδέν as an adjective, and makes clear that the difference or the being superior exists in no respect at all between the heir and the slave. Thus, Paul creates a contrast conceptually, but also syntactically, by placing the words δούλος and κύριος in the sentence as he does, drawing attention to the low status of the heir. This is effective rhetorically—and almost no translation manages to reproduce it (at least not in the languages with which the present author is familiar). Also, it provides a perfect connection with what follows in 4.3: ὅτε ἡμεν νήπιοι, ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ἡμεθα δεδουλωμένοι, by way of v. 2, where a *tertium comparationis* is provided: both an heir and a slave are people that are under the authority of others, namely, guardians (applicable to heirs in particular) and managers (applicable to slaves in particular). Here, the notions of being heir and slave are used without any further qualification,

which is rhetorically prepared by the language and phrasing of 4.1. Given these observations, the possible meaning of διαφέρω as indicating superiority becomes attractive, or even compelling; it is much stronger than just “be different from” and it also highlights the social contrast created by Paul’s hyperbole. This leaves one with a translation of this part of Gal 4.1 as “he is in no way superior to a slave, master though he may be of everything.” Such a translation would both safeguard the social “downgrading” of the heir’s status and the conceptual and syntactical contrast between the heir/slave vis-à-vis being lord of all. This translation would suit well the considerations of, e.g., Arichea and Nida, who indicate that the question of difference (or rather, superiority) at stake in Gal 4.1 is of a legal nature and of factual status rather than one of “essential” difference, or the like (1975, 87).

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, the following may be stated: Based on lexicographical, syntactical, and conceptual considerations, the thesis could be substantiated that a preferable translation of διαφέρει in Gal 4.1 would be “he is superior to,” rather than “he differs from,” as most translations and commentaries have it.⁵

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Abbreviations and Bible versions cited

BDAG	Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (see References)
EU	Einheitsübersetzung (1980)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
LSJ	Liddell, Scott, and Jones (see References)
NA ²⁸	Nestle–Aland <i>Greek New Testament</i> , 28th ed. (2012)
NAB	New American Bible (1970)
NBG	Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap (1951)
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible (1985)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
SV	Statenvertaling (1637)
WV	Willibrordvertaling (1995)