

Translating *Kōl*: When “All” Does Not Mean “All”

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Abstract

Hebrew *kōl* means “every,” “the whole,” “all.” However, a literal translation does not always make sense. I investigated cases where *kōl* does not express totality in the sense of “one hundred percent.” I present a collection of examples that show that *kōl* can also be used (1) to express variety, (2) as hyperbole, (3) in a way defined by the context, and (4) for stylistic reasons. I argue that *kōl* sometimes needs to be translated with expressions such as “all kinds of,” “all other,” “in unity,” or in other context-sensitive ways; where it is perceived as redundant or misleading, it may remain untranslated.

Keywords

all, *kōl*, totality, translate, literal, variety, hyperbole, context, style, redundant

Introduction

The Hebrew word *kōl* means “every,” “the whole,” “all.”¹ It is used frequently in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes translators feel it is redundant. Occasionally it is dropped in translation. But how do we decide whether this is justified or not? Besides the intuition of the mother-tongue speaker, what other factors should we consider in deciding about this particle? Several

¹ In general, *kōl* with a singular undetermined noun means “every,” *kōl* with a singular determined noun means “the whole,” and *kōl* with a plural noun means “all” (see *BHRG*, 309–10, and Lettinga and von Siebenthal 2016, 249–50). There are exceptions and debated cases. The details of that discussion are not the subject of this article. For more on the debate, see, for instance, JM §139e–g; Naudé 2011; Ziegert 2009; Kilchör 2015.

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of the examples that I present in an attempt to answer these questions I encountered when checking the books of 1 and 2 Kings; others I collected from the dictionaries and as I came across them incidentally. They include cases from a wide variety of texts (narrative, direct speech, law, and poetry).

Where *kōl* means “all” in the literal sense

Before looking at exceptions, let us take a look at two examples where *kōl* actually does express totality. Chapter 1 of Numbers reports the census of the Israelites in the wilderness. Verses 20-43 list how many soldiers were mustered of each tribe. Then, Numbers 1.45-46 says:²

⁴⁵ So the *whole* [*kōl*] *number* of the Israelites, by their ancestral houses, from twenty years old and upward, *everyone* [*kōl*] able to go to war in Israel—⁴⁶ their *whole* [*kōl*] *number* was six hundred three thousand five hundred fifty.

The point of this statement is to give the sum. And the numbers of soldiers in each tribe do add up to this amount. In Psalm 14.3, *kōl* means “all [people],” without exception. The verse says:

They have *all* [*kōl*] gone astray, they are all alike perverse;
there is no one who does good, no, not one.

That the statement applies to everybody is made explicit in the second line. This is also Paul’s understanding when he quotes this verse in Rom 3.12 (using *pantes* “all,” as in the Septuagint translation of this verse).

Where *kōl* does not mean “all” in the literal sense

There are plenty of contexts where a literal understanding of *kōl* as “all” is problematic, if not impossible. The meaning “all” needs some qualifying. Below I list some points to be considered when interpreting *kōl*.³

1. Variety

At times, *kōl* means “all kinds of,” “all sorts of.” For this meaning, BDB (s.v. *kōl* 1.b.) mentions Gen 2.9 and translates *kol-’ēš neḥmād lēmar’eh*

² Biblical quotes are taken from NRSV, unless indicated otherwise. Italics, denoting emphasis, and the bracketed material indicating the Hebrew behind the translation, are mine.

³ I gratefully acknowledge input received from several colleagues on various points.

as “*the whole of trees* (every kind of tree) pleasant to view.”⁴ NIV11R translates this as “all kinds of trees,” NLT07 as “all sorts of trees.” *HALOT* (s.v. *kōl* 10.b.) gives Neh 13.16 as an example:

Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and *all kinds of* [*kōl*] *merchandise* and sold them on the Sabbath.

Ten English versions translate this in the same sense.⁵

Related to this usage is the meaning “of every kind,” “any,” as in Lev 19.23 (NIV, “When you enter the land and plant *any kind of fruit tree*”; NASB, “all kinds of trees”).⁶ Variety is also expressed in Joel 3.1(2.28), which says:

I will pour out my spirit on *all* [*kōl*] *flesh*; *your sons and your daughters* shall prophesy, your *old men* shall dream dreams, and your *young men* shall see visions.

Leaving aside the question whether Israel or the whole world is in view, the emphasis seems to be that the spirit can be received regardless of gender, age, or social status. The next verse continues, “*Even* on the male and female *slaves*.” Consequently, NCV and NET translate, “I will pour out my Spirit *on all kinds of people*.” NET’s “Translator’s Note” adds the explanation, “The word ‘all’ refers not to all human beings without exception (cf. NAB, NASB ‘all mankind’; NLT ‘all people’), but to all classes of human beings without distinction (cf. NCV).” In contrast, NIV11R says, “I will pour out my Spirit *on all people*,” and GNB even has the more pointed “on everyone.” Both can be rather misleading, because what the Hebrew text as a whole suggests is that people will receive the spirit *independently of their status*, not that *all people without exception* will receive the spirit (cf. v. 5, “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved,” which does not include everybody).

2. Hyperbole and generalizing

Kōl can be used by way of hyperbole (exaggeration). Second Chronicles 28.24 says:

He [i.e., Ahaz] . . . made himself *altars in every corner of Jerusalem*.

⁴ Italics original. So also JM §139h: “every kind of tree.”

⁵ Cf. Lettinga and von Sieenthal 2016, 250: “manchmal *jede Art von*” (sometimes, *every kind of*).

⁶ So also Milgrom 2000 (ad loc.), “any kind of fruit tree”; and Hieke 2014 (ad loc.), “allerlei Bäume” (all sorts of trees).

Omanson and Ellington (2014) comment:

In every corner of Jerusalem is probably not to be taken literally, but is a way of saying that the construction of altars was widespread in Jerusalem. In some languages it may be better to say “all over Jerusalem” or “everywhere in Jerusalem.” However, CEV and NCV take the Hebrew words here literally by saying “on every street corner in Jerusalem.”

Another example is 2 Chr 36.23:

Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me *all the kingdoms* of the earth.

King Cyrus must have been aware that there were other peoples living beyond the territory that he controlled, but for all intents and purposes he claims that he is “ruler over the whole world” (so GNB). Further, consider 2 Kgs 20.13 (parallel: Isa 39.2):

there was nothing in his house or in *all his realm* that Hezekiah did not show them.

This statement is clearly meant to stress that Hezekiah did not withhold anything from his visitors’ sight. CEV expresses this by saying, “Nothing . . . was kept hidden from them.” This would still not mean that the visitors took a look at *every* vessel in the treasure house, and at *every* house in the country. Thus, the borderline between “all” in its strict sense, and “all” as an exaggeration is fluid.

To quote one further example, Judg 3.29 reads:

At that time they killed about ten thousand of the Moabites, *all* strong, able-bodied men; no one escaped.

For this occurrence, *HALAT* (s.v. *kōl* 9.c.) offers, “alles / *lauter* streitbare Männer” (where *HALOT* only translates “all fighting men”). “*Lauter*” also means “all,” but with an emphasis on the idea of “a lot of,” not on completeness. Accordingly, the *Textbibel* by Kautzsch and Weizsäcker (1899; “Deutkw” in Paratext) translates with “*lauter* starke und streitbare Leute” (*a lot of* strong and valiant people). NLT07 drops “all”:

They attacked the Moabites and killed about 10,000 of their strongest and most able-bodied warriors.

Perhaps instead of hyperbole, some cases can be explained as “generalizing.” An English sentence like “*Everybody* thought they would win the match” does not exclude the possibility that the view of a few outsiders differed from the general expectation.

Hyperbole is a figure of speech that works in many languages. Therefore, the above use of *kōl* might not cause much trouble in translation. However, there are cases where a direct transfer of *kōl* into the receptor language is potentially more problematic.

3. Context restricting the meaning

Numbers 25.4 presents a difficulty, if taken literally, because the next verse tells us something else. Thus the context qualifies *kōl*:

⁴ The LORD said to Moses, “Take *all the chiefs of the people*, and impale them in the sun before the LORD, . . .” ⁵ And Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you shall kill *any of your people who have yoked themselves* to the Baal of Peor.”

De Regt and Wendland (2016, ad loc.) comment:

All the chiefs of the people probably refers to only the Israelite leaders who were involved with the pagan worship mentioned in verses 1-3 (so Levine, page 285; Cole, page 439; Samaritan Pentateuch), so CEV says “the Israelite leaders who are responsible for this.” Another possible model is “all the guilty Israelite leaders.” A literal rendering will undoubtedly be understood as referring to the entire Israelite leadership.

Some commentators do think that all leaders are meant, but then it becomes difficult to explain v. 5. NJPS narrows down the group in v. 4 by translating “all the ringleaders.” Several other versions, e.g., REB, leave it to the reader to deal with the tension between “all the leaders” in v. 4 and “those . . . who have joined in the worship of the Baal of Peor” in v. 5.

Practical considerations also play a role in the understanding of Leviticus 24.14, which says:

Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let *all who were within hearing* lay their hands on his head, and let *the whole congregation* stone him.

First the verse talks only of the earwitnesses, then of the whole congregation (compare v. 16). It is hardly conceivable that a whole people stones one man. Now let us suppose that the “whole congregation” does not consist of the whole people of Israel, but only of those assembled. It is still questionable whether the order demands that every person present actively participate in the stoning. Perhaps the idea is more that they should act with one accord, unanimously. In that case, translating *kōl* with an adverbial phrase would be an option, as in, “Let the assembly act in unity and stone him.” And this is probably how the English versions (“the whole congregation,” “the entire assembly,” “all the people”) will be understood, because English, too,

allows for this kind of “loose” usage of “all.” One may still ask whether this is the most natural way of speaking. At least it is worthwhile checking whether that is so in the receptor language. I found no English, French, or German version that does not explicitly render *kōl* in both vv. 14 and 16. But let us take note of REB’s solution in rendering 2 Kgs 14.21 (parallel: 2 Chr 26.1). Literally, the verse says:

All the people of Judah took Azariah . . . , and made him king

REB translates creatively:

The people of Judah, *acting together*, took Azariah, . . .

The verbal system of some languages distinguishes a voice for actions done collectively or in mutual support. Such verb forms might be called for here. CEV apparently felt that “all” would be slightly awkward to use in English, and that the word did not contribute anything so essential to the meaning that it was worth retaining it:

After his death [Ø] the people of Judah made his son Azariah king,

Second Kings 10.18 is another case where *kol-hā’ām* “all the people” should not be taken too literally. We read:

¹⁸ Then Jehu *assembled all the people* and said to them, “Ahab offered Baal small service; but Jehu will offer much more.” ¹⁹ Now therefore summon to me all the prophets of Baal, all his worshipers, and all his priests; let none be missing, for I have a great sacrifice to offer to Baal; whoever is missing shall not live.” . . .

²⁰ Jehu decreed, “Sanctify a solemn assembly for Baal.” *So they proclaimed it.*

²¹ Jehu sent word throughout all Israel;

That Jehu “assembled all the people” (v. 18) can only mean that he assembled the population of Samaria, not the whole nation. Otherwise there would have been no need to make a proclamation afterwards (v. 20). NLT does, in fact, translate it that way: “Then Jehu called a meeting of *all the people of the city.*” (And probably it was not even the entire city population either, which would include all children and the elderly.)

On the other hand, in v. 19, Jehu states unmistakably that he does not want any worshiper of Baal to escape: “summon to me *all* the prophets of Baal, *all* his worshipers, and *all* his priests; let none be missing.” This is an example for how *kōl* serves to emphasize completeness, and this idea should be kept in translation.

BDB (2.b.[a]) draws attention to places “where the sense is *limited by the context* to things (or persons) just mentioned” (italics mine). This is the case, for instance, in Exod 29.23-24:

²³ and one loaf of bread, one cake of bread made with oil, and one wafer, out of the basket of unleavened bread that is before the LORD; ²⁴ and you shall place *all these* [*hakkōl* “everything”] on the palms of Aaron and on the palms of his sons,

Whereas in the above example, *kōl* refers to “all those that were mentioned,” in the next one it refers to “all those that were *not* mentioned.”

4. “All other,” “all remaining”

This is a special case of the preceding category, where context narrows down the meaning of “all.” Leviticus 11.23 says:

But *all other* [*kōl*] *winged insects* that have four feet are detestable to you.

All English versions add the word “other,” just like NASB in the above sentence. (And in the printed NASB text the word “other” is not even marked by italics.) This is justified and, in fact, necessary. The preceding vv. 21-22 had just stated an exception to the rule that is stated here. So the passage would be contradictory in itself if *kōl* were translated simply by “all.” In one translation project, it was felt that reversing the order brings out the logic better, so the translators put v. 23 before v. 21: “You may not eat *any* insects *except* for ones that hop.” A similar case is found in Exod 14.7:

He [i.e. Pharaoh] took six hundred picked chariots *and all the* [*other*] *chariots of Egypt*

After the special chariots have been mentioned, one cannot continue the sentence with “and all.” Again, all English versions insert the word “other,” or speak of “the rest.” GNB puts it the other way round: “He set out *with all his chariots, including* the six hundred finest.”⁷

5. Stylistic variation

One gets the impression that, at times, *kōl* is used for stylistic variation. When we compare 2 Kgs 20.13 with its parallel passage, Isa 39.2, we find that in one place the Isaiah text omits *kōl*, in another it adds the word:

2 Kgs 20.13: Hezekiah welcomed them; he showed them *all* [*kōl*] *his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his armory, all* [*kōl*] *that was found in his storehouses.*

⁷ Both Lev 11.23 and Exod 14.7 are also listed in Gesenius 2013 (s.v. *kōl* 3.a.) for the meaning “alle übrigen” (“all remaining” or “all the rest”).

Isa 39.2: Hezekiah welcomed them; he showed them *his treasure house*, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, *his whole* [*kōl*] *armory*, *all* [*kōl*] *that was found in his storehouses*.

If Isaiah uses the text from Kings (rather than the other way round), what motivated the writer to move *kōl*? In 2 Kings, *kōl* comes with the first and the last item of the list. Could this be a kind of bracketing? In Isaiah, *kōl* comes with the last two items. Should this signal a climax? Whatever the case, the difference seems to be a stylistic one. It would be difficult to argue that Isaiah felt the armory should receive more attention, and the treasure house less.

A similar case is 1 Kgs 15.33:

Baasha son of Ahijah began to reign *over all Israel* at Tirzah;

This sentence is part of the usual formula for introducing new kings. Normally, these formulas just speak of “Israel.” It is not at all obvious why the writer adds “all” in this spot. I have discussed minor differences in the formulas about the kings’ reigns elsewhere (Schmidt 2017). Such differences are probably not meant as interpretative hints, or to express a “deeper meaning.” More likely the variations exist because the writers were not striving for absolute consistency. Did the writer in 1 Kgs 15.33 want to say that Baasha reigned over a greater territory than his predecessors or successors? Most likely that was not his intention. Thus it could be wiser to drop *kōl* in translation than to make the reader wonder about such a point. In a few manuscripts and in the Greek text, the word is missing.⁸

Consider also 1 Kgs 15.23:

Now the rest of *all* the acts of Asa, *all* his power, *all* that he did, . . . are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah?

The typical sentence for closing a report about a king is, “Now the rest of the acts of *x*, and *all* that he did . . .” First Kings 15.23 is the only case out of more than forty where the phrasing is extended by *kōl*: “*all* the acts,” so that *kōl* is used three times in the formula. Conversely, in 1 Kgs 16.5, the usual phrase “and *all* that he did” is used uniquely without *kōl*: “the rest of the acts of Baasha, [Ø] what he did.” A comparison of Kings and Chronicles parallels, where they exist, may offer some insight as to the effects of such stylistic variation (see, e.g., Levin 2017, 81).

⁸ For a different appraisal, see Schmid 2000.

6. Lexical conventions

There can also be reasons related to the receptor language that lead the translator to leave out the equivalent for *kōl*. In 1 Kgs 10.4-5 we read,

When the queen of Sheba had observed *all the wisdom* of Solomon, . . . there was no more spirit in her.

Several translations into Turkic languages render “wisdom” without the particle *kōl* here. Most likely this happens simply because the two words do not collocate. However, one could consider using an adjective like “the deep wisdom” instead.

7. Redundancy

In other places “all” simply feels superfluous and unnatural. This has been observed in particular with the relative phrase *kōl ašer* “all who/that . . .” Although in English one can express the difference by saying either “who . . .” or “anyone who . . .,” it may be questioned whether we lose anything by dropping “anyone.” On Gen 4.15, Hamilton (1990, ad loc.) remarks,

The person warned is introduced simply with *a participle* (here *hōrēg*, “slays”), *which either stands by itself* (e.g., Exod. 21:12) *or is preceded by kol* (lit., “all,” here “whoever”), *with no discernible difference between the two forms.*

Where the source language uses different constructions, this can be meaningful. But if the difference cannot be defined, or is alien to the receptor language, it might not be worthwhile trying to maintain it artificially.

Leviticus 19.23 (cf. above under “Variety”), where NRSV has “When you come into the land and *plant all kinds of trees for food*,” NLT07 simply says, “When you enter the land and *plant [Ø] fruit trees*.” One may debate whether some emphasis in the Hebrew gets lost, but the translators of NLT apparently felt that the command in this form was clear enough—perhaps even more focused.

8. Conventional use

Evidence from the manuscripts shows that *kōl*—like other particles—tends to be added by copyists and scribes. See, e.g., *BHS* at Gen 32.24(23). The verse says of Jacob that he sent “what belonged to him” across the Jordan river. A textual variant inserts *kōl*: “And he sent across “everything that belonged to him.” HOTTP characterizes this change as a simplification of

the text (with a B-rating, meaning there is “some doubt about the validity” of the form [HOTTP 1:viii]). This means that *kōl* makes something explicit that the original text implies already. In comparable cases, where *kōl* is indeed part of the Masoretic text, this kind of explication might not be needed when translating into other languages.

9. Mismatches between languages

Apart from the factors identified above, a few further avenues could be pursued in trying to explain the usage of *kōl* in Hebrew. The following points may also play a role:

- Could the meaning of *kōl* include “the majority,” “most”? One question to ask in a study of this would be, What other words or constructions does Hebrew have to express this idea?
- Languages differ as to how explicitly they express certain aspects of meaning, and how much repetition they tolerate. What might be good Hebrew style could be perceived as redundant wording or tiresome repetitiveness in another language.
- “All the *x*” or “the whole *x*” can be used in emotive statements. Precision is then not the aim. For example, the sentence “It was *all* in vain” expresses frustration and is not meant as a rational assessment of the situation. Perhaps this happens more often in Hebrew than in other languages. For example, Ps 9.2(1) says, “I will *tell all* your wonderful deeds,” which NRSV rightly renders, “I will *tell of all* your wonderful deeds” (the two renderings suggest a difference between *listing* and *talking about*), since there is no way that a person could recount everything the LORD did.
- Sometimes, when *kōl* is used, the Hebrew writer might think of “togetherness” or collectivity more than of completeness. Some languages would express this idea with an adverb (“together,” “jointly”), not with the equivalent of “all.”

These thoughts are only meant as suggestions for what else might need to be considered when dealing with *kōl*.

Conclusion

Remarkably, the apostle Paul himself addresses our present issue. In 1 Cor 15.27, he quotes from Ps 8.7(6) and then adds a comment on his exegesis regarding *kōl*:

For “God has put *all things* in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “*All things* are put in subjection,” it is plain that this does not include the one who put *all things* in subjection under him.

Thus, Paul makes it extra clear who is not included when the text says “all.”

We have looked at a number of places where *kōl* obviously, or probably, does not mean “all” in the literal sense. Translators need to pay special attention to such places. Even where translating *kōl* as “all” does not create an incorrect sentence, a different construction can sometimes express the idea behind *kōl* more elegantly in the receptor language. As to *where* this might be the case, the grammatical construction does not help in deciding. As the various examples above show, the question about full *versus* approximate totality comes up with different constructions—whether *kōl* occurs with singular undetermined nouns (“every”), or with singular determined nouns (“whole”), or with plural nouns (“all”). Thus, the sense has to be determined from clues from the context.

To maintain some balance, I would like to state once more that *kōl* may very well have an important function. For example, when the writer of Genesis describes the famine in Egypt at the time of Joseph, he uses *kōl* eight times in four verses (Gen 41.54-57). This is clearly meant to underline how severe the famine was, and translators should express this in their language. If pure repetition is unnatural in the receptor language, there might be other means of achieving the same effect. I do not advocate the careless omission of *kōl*, but a mechanical rendering with the equivalent of “all” in the receptor language is not a fitting translation—not “all-ways.” I hope the above compilation contributes to a higher awareness of the factors involved. An examination of the Greek word *pas* “every,” “all,” “whole” in the New Testament would also be worthwhile.

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Abbreviations

- BDB Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1906 (in References)
- BHRG Van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze 2017 (in References)
- BHS *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (in References)
- CEV Contemporary English Version (1999)
- GNB Good News Bible (1992)
- HALAT Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 1967–1995 (in References)
- HALOT Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000 (in References)
- HOTTP Barthélemy et al. 1973–1980 (in References)

JM	Joūon and Muraoka 2011 (in References)
NAB	New American Bible (1970)
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1995)
NCV	New Century Version (2005)
NET	NET Bible (New English Translation; 2001)
NIV11R	New International Version (2011, revised)
NJPS	<i>Tanakh</i> —New Jewish Publication Society Version (1985)
NLT07	New Living Translation (2007)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
REB	Revised English Bible (1989)