
Translating 2 John 12 and 3 John 14

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Abstract

This paper explores the background of the phrase *stoma pros stoma* as it occurs in 2 John 12 and 3 John 14. If John drew from Num 12.8 and the “Prophet like Moses” theme in the Pentateuch when writing this phrase, then it may have not only rhetorical, but also theological significance in these letters. A translation of this phrase is offered that maintains John’s connection to the Septuagint and remains sensitive to the context of the letter closings.

KeywordsSeptuagint, letter, mouth, face, presence, *stoma pros stoma*, 2 John, 3 John

The two shortest letters in the New Testament, 2 and 3 John, are also the two that most closely resemble secular letters from the first century. John ends both texts with a curious expression: “I hope to come to you and speak face to face [*stoma pros stoma*]” (2 John 12b NASB), and “I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face [*stoma pros stoma*]” (3 John 14 NASB). There are two questions that should be raised about these verses. First, have English translations like NASB adequately rendered this phrase? Although the phrase reads literally “mouth to mouth,” most English translations choose “face to face” instead. Second, is it significant that a similar phrase occurs in Num 12.8? That John is likely using language from this verse to express a common epistolary theme should at least be considered in the translation of these verses. After an argument is made for this connection, the context of Num 12.8 will be explored. Its implications for John’s letters will be observed before I recommend a translation for these verses.

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(For simplicity's sake, I will refer to the author of both the Gospel and the Epistles as John.)

Though a connection to Num 12.8 may seem tenuous, two lines of evidence support this interpretation. First, this phrase is missing from other early letters (although Brown 1982, 678, mentions its occurrence in a Greek magical papyrus). In fact, the exact phrase *stoma pros stoma* occurs in none of the documents catalogued in the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri (which can be accessed at papyri.info). Although it was common for correspondents to express their desire to be present with one another in friendly letters of the first century, it appears that *stoma pros stoma* was not the usual way of expressing this sentiment (Stowers 1986, 60, and White 1986, 202). Thus, readers are justified to consider the Septuagint as a possible background for this phrase.

Second, Num 12.8 shares parallel themes with John's writings and contextual similarity with his letters. The only other occurrence of this phrase in the Septuagint occurs in Jer 39.4 (32.4 in the MT), which seems a less likely background than Num 12.8. Numbers 12.8 in the Septuagint reads, "Mouth to mouth [*stoma kata stoma*] I will speak to him, in visible form and not through riddles. And he has seen the glory of the Lord" (NETS). Although Numbers uses a different preposition, the similarity in phrasing is enough to explore a potential connection between these verses. Significantly, the theme of seeing God occurs in this Old Testament verse as well as in 3 John 11b, which reads, "The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God [*ouch heōraken ton theon*]" (NASB). However, this primarily corroborates the most important thematic connection between these verses: the "Prophet like Moses" theme. In his Gospel, John develops this theme from the Pentateuch, where it is explicitly stated in Deut 18.15-20. Two other passages contribute to the theme and serve as important background for the idiom in 2 and 3 John. First, Exod 33.11 reads, "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face [MT: *panim 'el panim*; LXX: *enōpios enōpiō*], just as a man speaks to his friend" (NASB). Similarly, Deut 34.10 states, "Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face [MT: *panim 'el panim*; LXX: *prosōpon kata prosōpon*]" (NASB). John quickly highlights this theme in his Gospel (see John 1.21), ultimately picturing Christ as "the Prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6.14; see also John 7.40). When John references this theme, he draws on passages from the Pentateuch to portray Jesus as one who stands in line with Moses, having a unique relationship to God. These thematic parallels justify a potential connection between Num 12 and the *stoma pros stoma* idiom in 2 and 3 John.

With a tentative connection established, the OT background should next be observed. In Num 12, Aaron and Miriam challenge Moses's prophetic role, asking, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not

spoken through us as well?” (Num 12.2 NASB). In response, God confirms the type of relationship he has with Moses:

⁶ He said,

“Hear now My words:

If there is a prophet among you,

I, the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision.

I shall speak with him in a dream.

⁷ Not so, with My servant Moses,

He is faithful in all My household;

⁸ With him I speak mouth to mouth [MT: *peh 'el peh*; LXX: *stoma kata stoma*],

Even openly, and not in dark sayings,

And he beholds the form of the LORD.

Why then were you not afraid

To speak against My servant, against Moses?” (Num 12.6-8 NASB)

While Exod 33.11 and Deut 34.10 (quoted above) describe the relationship between God and Moses being “face to face” (MT: *panim 'el panim*), Num 12.8 MT has *peh 'el peh* “mouth to mouth,” uniquely describing the type of communication that takes place between God and Moses. The Septuagint translates this phrase as *stoma kata stoma*. When John writes *stoma pros stoma*, he is not referencing the “Prophet like Moses” theme generally, but Num 12.8 particularly. *Stoma kata stoma* indicates more than the personal relationship between God and Moses; it describes the nature of their conversation. It indicates that God spoke *directly* to Moses, with nothing coming between them.

If this potential background stands, then what is the significance of *stoma pros stoma* in 2 and 3 John? Looming behind the letters of John is the presence of deceivers and deniers, who neither know nor walk in the truth (1 John 2.18-19, 22, 26; 4.1-6; 2 John 7, 9). In 2 John, John seeks to persuade his audience to continue walking in the truth by remaining obedient to Christ’s teachings and by resisting the teachings of the opponents (Watson 1989a, 107–10). In 3 John, John praises Gaius in an effort to ensure that he continues walking in the truth by showing hospitality to itinerant missionaries and by resisting Diotrephes (Watson 1989b, 484–85). In both letters, it is possible that *stoma pros stoma* functions as a rhetorical constraint by which John intends to motivate his recipients to obey his instructions by mentioning an impending visit (contra Watson 1989a, 129). John wants to be physically present with his recipients in order to personally ensure their commitment to the

truth. Furthermore, it is also possible that, by connecting his visit to the “Prophet like Moses” theme, John intends to communicate a theological point as well: his message comes from God and the message of his opponents does not. Thus, *stoma pros stoma* not only functions on a rhetorical level by indicating John’s visit, but it may also function on a theological level by identifying the source of John’s message as God.

At other places in John’s writings, he similarly asserts that his message comes from God. Just as God spoke directly to Moses in the Old Testament, so he has spoken directly through Jesus Christ: “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1.18 NASB). John does not create a new message, but rather testifies to his readers about the incarnate Christ. At the end of his Gospel, John writes, “But these [signs] have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20.31 NASB). Similarly, he ends his first letter, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. . . . And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5.13, 20 NASB). In light of these clear assertions, *stoma pros stoma* suggests that John’s message comes directly from God, and that he hopes to deliver it directly to his recipients. By including *stoma pros stoma* in the letter closings of 2 and 3 John, John strengthens the rhetorical appeal of the letters and invites his readers to consider that his message was revealed by God.

However, it is important to remember that the background from Num 12 does not introduce a foreign interpretation or translation into the letter closing of 2 or 3 John. The linguistic context of this phrase in each letter closing demonstrates that *stoma pros stoma* means something more than John’s personal presence. In 2 John, *stoma pros stoma* stands in contrast to “paper and ink”; in 3 John, “pen and ink” (Jobes 2014, 335). It is clear that John no longer wishes to write to his audience, but to be physically present with them. However, if John were only intending to communicate his desire for physical presence, why not use some form of the “face to face” idiom, which occurs elsewhere (as noted above) in connection with the “Prophet like Moses” theme? The choice of *stoma pros stoma* appears to be intentional. Furthermore, a surface reading, without any appeal to the Old Testament, suggests that the phrase indicates *dialogue*, not merely *presence*, since “mouth” could be a metaphor for conversation (Yarborough 2008, 358). Thus, the contexts of 2 and 3 John indicate that the meaning of *stoma pros stoma* involves not only John’s physical presence, but also the nature of his message.

With this framework established, the English translations should be evaluated. The translation history of this phrase in English reveals a single consistent interpretation, as the following versions demonstrate:

KJV (1611): “we shall speak face to face.”

ASV (1901): “we shall speak face to face.”

RSV (1952): “we will talk together face to face.”

NIV (1978): “we will talk face to face.”

NKJV (1982): “we shall speak face to face.”

AB (1982): “we can have a heart-to-heart talk.”

CEV (1995): “then we can talk in person.”

NASB (1995): “we will speak face to face.”

ESV (2001): “we will talk face to face.”

CSB (2017): “we will talk face to face.”

These translations interpret *stoma pros stoma* as primarily indicating John’s personal presence, as the English idiom “face to face” suggests. Where translators deviate from this typical translation, it could be argued that the resultant renderings emphasize personal presence even more (as in the case of CEV and AB). However, these translations are unsatisfactory because they obscure the OT background of the phrase and are potentially insensitive to the linguistic clues noted above in the context of 2 and 3 John. In light of these considerations, how should *stoma pros stoma* be translated in 2 John 12 and 3 John 14? The following translations aim to be informed by the OT background and to remain sensitive to the immediate context and figurative language.

2 John 12: “Although I have many things to write to you, I do not wish to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to be with you and to speak directly [*stoma pros stoma*], so that our joy might be complete.”

3 John 14: “I have many things to write to you, but I do not want to write to you with ink and pen. Instead, I hope to see you soon, and we will speak directly [*stoma pros stoma*].”

In addition, a footnote should be added that provides the literal rendering “mouth to mouth,” along with the reference to Num 12.8. This approach is beneficial for numerous reasons. First, “directly” reads nicely in English while avoiding the pitfalls of over-translating (as in “heart to heart”) and translating in a way that only emphasizes personal presence (as in “face to face”). Second, it fits well in the context of 2 and 3 John, since it describes the type of communication that John desires to have while also implying his personal presence. Third, it maintains the Old Testament allusion, since the

underlying Hebrew idiom (*peh 'el peh*) could also be rendered “directly” (see the translation of Num 12.8 in CSB). Finally, the footnote with the literal rendering and cross-reference invites readers today to consider John’s message in light of the paradigm established between God and Moses.

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Abbreviations

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| AB | Anchor Bible (Brown 1982 in References) |
| ASV | American Standard Version (1901) |
| CEV | Contemporary English Version (1995) |
| CSB | Christian Standard Bible (2017) |
| ESV | English Standard Version (2001) |
| KJV | King James Version (1611) |
| LXX | Septuagint |
| MT | Masoretic Text |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible (1995) |
| NETS | <i>New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> (Pietersma and Wright 2007 in References) |
| NIV | New International Version (1978) |
| NKJV | New King James Version (1982) |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version (1952) |