

Christmas Tidings: Unfolding the Meaning of Luke 2:14

by James Nickel

Luke 2:14, “δοξα εν υψιστοις θεω και επι γης ειρηνη εν ανθρωποις ευδοκια.”

Young’s Literal translation (1862), “Glory in the highest to God and upon earth peace to men good will.”
The Authorized Version (1769) stays true to the literal Greek.

Other translations:

American Standard Version (1901), “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased.”

Weymouth translation (1912), “Glory be to God in the highest Heavens, and on earth peace among men who please Him!”

Revised Standard Version (1947), “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!”

English Standard Version (2001, a revision of Revised Standard Version of 1971), “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

New King James Version (1982), “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

Word meanings:

δοξα (doxa): dignity, glory (-ious), honour, praise, worship.

υψιστοις (hupsistos): supreme, most high.

θεω (theo): God

γης (ges): earth

ειρηνη (eirene): peace, prosperity, quiet, rest, to set at one again.

ανθρωποις (anthropois): human beings, mankind.

ευδοκια (eudokia): satisfaction, kindness, desire, purpose, good pleasure.

Luke 2:14 is the last phrase of the words spoken by the angels of heaven to the shepherds who were watching that night the flocks, indeed *sacrificial* flocks designed for the soon coming Passover, concerning the newborn Christ. I intend to analyze these words, especially the last phrase, εν ανθρωποις ευδοκια, by noting the differences among translations.

First, let’s note the emphasis on three realms:

Heaven: In the highest (indeed the heavens), the angels proclaim in praise and worship “Glory to God.”

Earth: On earth, the angels speak “peace.” In the person and work of this newborn child is peace; where there was once enmity and war; in Christ, the ultimate *sacrificial* Lamb, the peace that results from the reconciliation of warring parties will be accomplished.

Mankind: To men, the angels speak “good will.”

Second., all translations agree except for the referent to mankind. Here is where there is a marked difference. The differences in the translation all stem from a change in a Greek word from the Received Text or *Textus Receptus* (ca. 17th century) to the Westcott and Hort¹ revised Greek text (late 19th century), a text based upon two somewhat *older*, yet spurious Greek manuscripts, known as the Codex Vaticanus (B) and the Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph).² In the Greek, “eudokia” (a noun) is changed to genitive “eudokias.”

¹ English Bishop Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901) and the Irish theologian Dr. Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828-1892).

² In this case, the maxim, “Older is better,” does *not* apply. Why do translation scholars accept the variant reading of *two* manuscripts when over 900 agree? What kind of logic is this? This is an example of presuppositional bias where a man’s faith determines how he views the facts. The “cultural atmosphere” governing most Bible scholars of late 19th century (note Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* was published in 1859) permeated with a pre-commitment to rationalism and naturalism (man’s mind is the

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Recall that in certain inflected languages, the genitive case denotes possession. Hence, because of the “assumed” correctness of the genitive case, the phrase is translated in a way that denotes the message of Christ belonging to a certain class of men, men who “possess” good will. Here is a table comparing the translations based upon the primary Greek source.

<i>endokia (noun)</i>		<i>endokias (genitive case)</i>	
<i>Translation</i>	<i>Primary Greek Source</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Primary Greek Source</i>
Authorized	Textus Receptus	American Standard	Westcott and Hort
Young’s Literal	Textus Receptus	Weymouth	Westcott and Hort
New King James	Textus Receptus	Revised Standard	Westcott and Hort
		English Standard	Westcott and Hort

In the context of this difference, how shall we appropriate the correct meaning? John Calvin (1509-1564) a leading Protestant reformer and theologian, addresses these differences in his *Commentaries on the Gospels*. He explains what I believe to be the true meaning of this phrase according to usage and context:

The Vulgate [a Latin translation of the Bible by Jerome (ca. 347-420), a translation used at Calvin’s time by Roman Catholics – JN] has *good-will* in the genitive case: *to men of good-will*. How that reading crept in, I know not: but it ought certainly to be rejected, both because it is not genuine, and because it entirely corrupts the meaning. Others read *good-will* in the nominative case,³ and still mistake its meaning. They refer good-will to men, as if it were an exhortation to embrace the grace of God. I acknowledge that the peace which the Lord offers to us takes effect only when we receive it. But as $\epsilon\upsilon\delta\omicron\kappa\iota\alpha$ is constantly used in Scripture in the sense of the Hebrew word רְצוֹן , the old translator rendered it *beneplacitum*, or, *good-will*. This passage is not correctly understood as referring to the acceptance of grace. The angels rather speak of it as the source of peace, and thus inform us that peace is a free gift, and flows from the pure mercy of God. If it is thought better to read good-will to men, or towards men, it will not be inadmissible, so far as regards the meaning: for in this way it will show the *cause* of peace to be, that God has been pleased to bestow his undeserved favor on men, with whom he formerly was at deadly variance. If you read, the peace of good-will as meaning voluntary peace, neither will I object to that interpretation. But the simpler way is to look upon $\epsilon\upsilon\delta\omicron\kappa\iota\alpha$ as added, in order to inform us of the source from which our peace is derived.

The good-will of God revealed in the gift of the Christ child to a world at war *is* the *source* of peace, reconciliation, and atonement for that world at war. The Christ was aptly given the name Jesus, meaning “He shall save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21) but this Jesus is also denoted in the Gospel of John (John 1:29) as “the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.” God in Christ by His Spirit saves His people from their sins with the express purpose of reconciling or bringing peace to a “world at war” (II Corinthians 5:17-21), indeed *to save that world* (John 4:42).

John also states that “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). When God the Father gave God the Son by God the Holy Spirit in human form through the Virgin Mary, He did so to display His good-will intentions to save a world at war with Him. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

And, by His continued good-will, based upon by the finished work of His Son on the Cross and by the application of that work to the world by the efficaciousness of His Holy Spirit, He shall comprehensively and collectively save the world.⁴

judge; all facts and processes can be explained in naturalistic terms). In contrast, the “cultural atmosphere” governing most Bible scholars of early 17th century was permeated by a pre-commitment to revelation and supernaturalism.

³ In the Latin phrase *Nauta bonus est* (The sailor is good), *nauta* (sailor) is in the nominative case.

⁴ According to the prophetic imagery of Ezekiel 47 (cf. John 7:37-39), the rivers of the healing waters of the

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Commenting on John 3:16 and the purpose of the Incarnation of Christ in general, the theologian and Presbyterian minister Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield (1851-1921) said:

The love here celebrated is, we must remember, the love of God – of the Lord God Almighty; and it is love to the world – which altogether “lies in the evil one.” It is a love which is great, and powerful, and all-conquering; which attains its end, and will not stand helpless before any obstacle. It is the precise purpose of the passage to teach us this, to raise our hearts to some apprehension of the inconceivable greatness of the love of God, set as it is upon saving the wicked world You must not fancy, then, that God sits helplessly by while the world, which He created for Himself, hurtles hopelessly to destruction, and He is able only to snatch with difficulty here and there a brand from the universal burning Through all the years an increasing purpose runs, one increasing purpose: the kingdoms of the earth become ever more the kingdom of our God and His Christ. The process may be slow; the progress may appear to our impatient eyes to lag. But it is God who is building: and under His hands the structure rises as steadily as it does slowly, and in due time the capstone shall be set into its place, and to our astonished eyes shall be revealed nothing less than a saved world.⁵

Atonement will, through the agency of those who believe in the Christ empowered by the Spirit, *flood the entire earth* (cf. Isaiah 11:9 and Habakkuk 2:14) ... albeit slowly but surely indeed. In spite of this worldwide flood there will be pockets or “marshes that will not be healed” (Ezekiel 47:11). In time and on earth, there will be, as a result of God’s good-will, comprehensive, collective, and substantial healing, *not* universal, complete, or absolute healing. We await the consummation of the New Heavens and the New Earth for this totality of healing (cf. Revelation 22:1-3).

⁵ Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *The Saviour of the World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), pp. 122-125.

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