

I will be dealing with an interesting question in this week's Readers' Mailbag, having to do with the translation of the New Testament from Greek into English. It involves a problem with a familiar verse (recited every Christmas!) that has a textual problem: different manuscripts have different readings - involving a single letter! - that affect the translation.

QUESTION:

A lot of different hymns and liturgies and suchlike make reference to or paraphrase the Gloria, which in turn is based on Luke 2:14. I'd always heard (various permutations of) two different versions: "Glory to God in the highest and on Earth peace to men of good will" and "Glory to God in the highest and on Earth peace, goodwill to men". That is, of course, quite a significant difference in meaning. The Latin is "Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis", which I understand is unambiguously "...men of good will". Unfortunately, I don't read a word of Greek; the text of the Gloria I found online was Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις Θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκία, but I couldn't read it, so I asked a friend who is a classical scholar. She translated it as "Glory to God in the highest (things) and upon the earth peace (and) goodwill among people." But I don't know if I had the right text, or if there are different texts of the Gloria, or how it corresponds to Luke 2:14 or if different manuscripts have different texts of the latter. Apologies if I'm confused or being silly (I'm a lawyer, not a Biblical scholar).

RESPONSE:

This is a reference to a passage in the birth narrative of Luke's Gospel, where, at Jesus' birth, the angelic host comes from heaven and makes a proclamation to the shepherds that "to you has been born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. The angels then break out into a chorus and sing out, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, goodwill to people." Or do they say, instead, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to people of goodwill"?

To some readers it may not seem like much of a difference, but in fact it is. The question involves...

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