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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ibs-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php)

## ROMANS 12:9-21 - A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

Kim Paffenroth

The twelfth chapter of Romans marks the beginning of the parenthetic section of the epistle. Verses 1-2 function as an introduction or summary of the chapter. Verses 3-8 enumerate and make statements about specific charismatic gifts or functions, while verses 9-21 move on to more general exhortations for the entire Christian community, [Cranfield, p. 628-629; Leenhardt, p. 313; Murray, v. II, p. 128; Käsemann, p. 344, although he tries through some subtle distinction to distance himself from the others]. Painted with strokes this broad, the purpose of v. 9-21 appears quite clear. However, closer inspection of this section reveals numerous problems of both translation and interpretation.

First, regarding the section as a whole, there is the nagging question of what is the unifying feature of the section. Although the section certainly "feels" like a unity to most, (attempts to break the section down further have been suggested from time to time, [Franzmann, p. 223-230; Baules, p. 260-269], but the section is in general acknowledged to hang together as a unit somehow,) attempts to explain its unifying feature tend to fall flat. Most often it is said that v. 9 is a topic sentence for the section: the section is an explication of what "sincere love" is, [Dodd, p. 196-201; Dunn, p. 739; Nygren, p. 423-426], or even more especially, what it means for love to be "sincere", [Lagrange, p. 301; Spicq, p. 198-210]. These attempts, though perhaps true enough as a broad statement about the section, when pushed too far are rightly criticized, [Cranfield, p. 628-631; Käsemann, p. 343]. Some even emphasize the role of "the (Holy) Spirit" as a central aspect of the section, [Leenhardt, p. 313], a tenuous position, given only one ambiguous reference to "spirit" in the section. Cranfield seems to be one of the more honest when he unimpressively labels the section "A Series of Loosely Connected Items of Exhortation" [Cranfield, p. 628]. Although Spicq certainly overstates his case for unifying the section around an explication of how love is to be "sincere", in his argument he does make a useful observation about the recurrence of the words for good and evil, ("agathos/kalos" and "poneros/kakos,") in the section, [Spicq, p. 200]. All would agree that whatever organization the section has, it is based on "Stichwort" - catchwords or implied word associations, [Dunn, p. 737]. Spicq follows through on this by observing that the words good/evil occur at the beginning of the section, "hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good," v. 9; the middle, (approximately), "Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is good in the sight of all," v. 17; and at the end, making an inclusio, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good," v. 21. The section can thus be said to revolve around a discussion of good and evil, certainly appropriate in a section on ethics. This seems more

convincing than trying to make the section center on "love" or "spirit", words which only occur once in the entire section.

V. 9 presents the least problems of translation. It is, of course, by now a mere truism to note the special significance of ἀγάπη in early Christian circles. The noun has thus far in Romans only been used to refer to God's love, (5:5, 8; 8:39,) or Christ's love, (8:35). The verbal form has been used of human love of God, (8:28,) and of divine love for humanity, (8:37; 9:13, 25). This is then the first time in the epistle that it is used of human relations with one another, (as it is subsequently at 13:10 and 14:15). The paradigmatic feeling of human/divine relations is now advanced as the standard to be aimed at in inter-personal relations. Whether this is intended here to refer only to love of fellow-Christians or to a more wide understanding of love of those outside the church as well is unclear, [Cranfield, p. 630]. The verbs in the second half of the verse used are unusually strong, ἀποστύγω - "to detest utterly, hate" (only here in the NT); πονηρός - "evil, wicked" (only here in Romans) - as opposed to the more usual κακός - "bad"; and κολλάω - "to stick with, cling to, join to." The usual observation to make at this point is to seize on the word "love" and the discussion of the body which precedes it and therefore compare this verse and what follows to 1 Cor 13, [Dodd, p. 198; Murray, v. II, p. 128; Nygren, p. 423-426], but the second half of the verse makes a comparison with the paranetic section ending at I Thess 5:21-22 more apt, [Dunn, p. 740], "hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil."

In v. 10, the readers are told to "show familial affection for one another in brotherly love." The use of "brother" for fellow-members of a religious group was hardly unique to Christianity, being also used by Jews as well as the followers of Mithras and others, [Cranfield, p. 631; Dunn, p. 741; for a more extensive list, Lagrange, p. 302]. However, the combination of these two words here, as well as the redundant "one another", does seem striking. The second half of the verse presents problems of translation with the verb "proegeomai". Cranfield seems to have the most objective and detailed presentation of the possibilities, [Cranfield, p. 632-633]. It has been rendered in at least three ways: "outdo one another," [RSV]; "anticipate" or "precede one another," ("beat one to it,") [Spicq, p. 201; Kirk, p. 232; O'Neill, p. 201-202; Dunn, p. 741]; and "prefer" or "esteem more highly," [Käsemann, p. 346; Cranfield, p. 632-633]. The third possibility seems the most tenuous, given the extremely thin textual evidence for such a meaning for the verb, (2Mac 10:12 and a textual variant of Phil 2:3). However, none of the translations are completely convincing, and it will probably have to be left at that.

There are two major problems of translation in v. 11, and on both of them, many modern scholars seem to have missed the mark. The first is the question of what type of πνεῦμα is referred to here? Oddly, although the

overwhelming majority of translations interpret it to be "fervent in spirit," [KJV, JB, NJB, NEB, NIV], a great many modern commentators side with the RSV in interpreting it as "aglow with the (Holy) Spirit," [Cranfield, p. 633-634; Käsemann, p. 346; Dunn, 742; Barrett, p. 240]. There are several problems with this translation. First, the burden of proof would seem to be on those who wish to translate it as "Holy Spirit" to produce some reason why the context demands or even suggests it; none have done so. Secondly, the parallel with Acts 18:25, (the only other NT occurrence of the verb ζῆλω,) tells against this translation, since in that passage all unquestioningly agree that the translation must be "fervent in spirit." Finally, as Barrett's comment admits, [Barrett, p. 240], this translation relies in part on the parallel with "the Lord" in the last part of the verse, which is a questionable text which will be discussed next. The commentators seem to be using two dubious readings to prop up one another.

In the last part of v. 11, there are several manuscripts which read κἀρῶ instead of κυρίῳ. Again, Cranfield seems to have the best presentation of the evidence for and against this variant, [Cranfield, p. 634-636]. In favor of reading κἀρῶ is: 1) that it is certainly the more difficult reading, and no reason can be advanced as to why someone would want deliberately to substitute it in place of κυρίῳ, whereas the reverse substitution is easily imagined; 2) that "the Lord" seems rather out of place in this list, (I would again add that, as per Barrett's admission cited above, it seems less out of place if one reads "Holy Spirit" instead of just "spirit" in the previous clause); 3) that a reference to the eschatological "time" would seem very much in place in this list, especially in light of the use of the term at 13:11. Despite his more or less granting all of these objections, Cranfield, along with many other commentators, [Cranfield, p. 635-636; Barrett, p. 234; Dunn, p. 737; Murray, vol. II, p. 131], nonetheless favors the reading "the Lord," postulating a convenient scribal error from a damaged or abbreviated manuscript. An argument in favor of rejecting "serving the time" is that it has the pejorative connotation of "opportunism" in other writers, but the examples adduced are either Latin, (Cicero,) or much later Greek, (Plutarch,) [Cranfield, p. 635], and neither of these authors seems particularly relevant in bringing light to an eschatologically oriented text such as this. Once again, although his analysis is flawed and dated in some respects, Spicq seems to have been more objective than many others when he rendered this verse as, "be fervent in spirit; meet the demands of the hour," [Spicq, p. 199; cf. also O'Neill, p. 202].

V. 12 is a rather uncontroversial verse, although the eschatological outlook of it, with its references to "hope" and "tribulation", again lends more likelihood to the reading of κἀρῶ in the previous verse. The verse is typical

of the Pauline "already/not yet" of eschatological tension: the eschaton has already begun, and this causes the believers to "rejoice", while knowing that there is still much more to come, for which they have great "hope" and expectation. Also, despite their present rejoicing, and hope for more to come, the believers know that the beginning of the eschaton is characterized by birth-pangs of "tribulation", which will require that they be "enduring" and "persistent in prayer."

V. 13 is likewise not especially troublesome, although there is one textual difficulty. Several manuscripts read  $\mu\epsilon\iota\alpha\iota\varsigma$  instead of  $\chi\rho\epsilon\iota\alpha\iota\varsigma$ . Using the same criteria as we did in v. 11, we should be inclined to accept  $\mu\epsilon\iota\alpha\iota\varsigma$  as the original reading, since it is the more difficult. However, this would be to ignore its consistent usage in Paul, where it is always used to mean remembrances in prayer or thought, most often in the greeting of the letter, (Rom 1:9; 1 Thess 1:2, 3:6; Philemon 4; Phil 1:3), and never practical and concrete deeds of kindness and aid, as the parallel with "hospitality" demands it must refer to here. The suggestion that it was a merely mechanical error of mistaking "XP" for "MN" because they look alike (?!), [Cranfield, p. 638; Dunn, p. 737], does seem unlikely, however. The variant would seem rather to have been substituted at a later date when "saints" meant those of the past, and it had become a common practice to commemorate or intercede for them posthumously, [Käsemann, p. 346; Lagrange, p. 304-305]. Aside from this textual question, the verse is a clear call for practical aid amongst Christians. It need not be a specific reference to the collection for Jerusalem, [Barrett, p. 240], although that would certainly be a clear example of the type of concern which is encouraged here; nor need we interpret "contributing to the needs of the saints" as implying a lack of concern for all others, [Cranfield, p. 639]. "Hospitality" would have been of especial concern in antiquity for two reasons: first, for religious reasons, as both paganism and Judaism stressed benevolence towards strangers, (Zeus as protector of strangers; Abraham showing hospitality to the three heavenly visitors, alluded to in Heb 13:2), and early Christianity followed along this path, [Dunn, p. 743-744]; secondly, for practical reasons, as lodgings were evidently hard to come by, [Käsemann, p. 346-347; Dunn, p. 744]. This importance seems to be stressed by the use of the verb  $\delta\iota\omega\kappa\omega$  - the readers are told to "pursue" hospitality.

This verb provides the connector between v. 13 and 14, though it has now shifted to the meaning "persecute". There are two very minor textual questions in this verse, (omission of the second  $\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\lambda\omicron\gamma\epsilon\iota\tau\epsilon$  and omission of  $\acute{\upsilon}\mu\omicron\varsigma$  neither of which changes the meaning of the verse substantially, [Cranfield, p. 640, against Bruce, p. 229]. The Semitic background here for the idea of "blessing" should be strongly stressed over against its Greek meaning: in

Greek usage, the verb means merely "to speak well of, to eulogize," whereas its Hebrew background is what is in mind here, where it means to call upon YHWH to bestow blessings upon someone, [Dunn, p. 744]. To do this for an enemy is a radical command indeed, either here or in the Synoptics. A real question, if not of meaning, than at least of the history of traditions, is how this uncited "quote" by Paul is related to the tradition preserved in the Synoptics. A very tentative suggestion of Pauline knowledge of the Jesus tradition, [Cranfield, p. 640], seems overly cautious, although some claims in the other direction do seem overstated, "...the Jesus-tradition was evidently of fundamental importance to him (Paul)," [Wenham, p. 24]. It seems safe to say that Paul clearly knew of the Jesus tradition in a form close to that of the Synoptics; and, significantly, in these verses, in a form closer to that of Luke 6:27-38, a section generally acknowledged to most probably go back to the historical Jesus, [Allison, p. 10-12].

In v. 15, the thought of the passage again turns to "rejoicing", "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." This time, though, the exhortation strangely does not have the eschatological urgency of other similar NT passages, (e.g. Jn 16:20; Lk 6:21, 25), in which rejoicing is said to turn to weeping, and vice versa, in the approaching eschatological age, [Dunn, p. 746]. This verse seems to be more concerned with the mutual support of Christians in the present age, and perhaps their support and commiseration with outsiders as well, [Cranfield, p. 642], the latter attitude perhaps with missionary intent, [Daube, p. 162-164]. Significantly, this verse is strongly anti-Stoic, utterly opposed to their ideal of impassive detachment, ἀταράχιοι, [Bruce, p. 229; Käsemann, p. 347].

V. 16 is held together by catchwords from the "phron-" word group. The readers are first told "to think the same thing with one another," in the sense of "agree with one another," [Cranfield, p. 642-643], with the extended meaning of "live in harmony with one another" [Dunn, p. 746] (cf. Rom 15:5; 2Cor 13:11). Again, the attitude may have a missionary intent, either in the sense that the Christians' harmonious living amongst themselves will be an example to others, [Cranfield, p. 643], or in the sense that their harmonious attitude to their non-Christian neighbors will help convert them, [Daube, p. 162-164].

In the next two clauses of v. 16, the thought moves from the unity encouraged in the first clause to warnings against pride or ambition, which could naturally cause disunity or strife within the community. The readers are first told not to "mind high things." This would evidently be a warning against ambition, but the parallel with 11:20 implies more of a concern with haughtiness or pride, as some members of the community might lord their supposed spiritual superiority over others, [Dunn, p. 746; Cranfield, p.

643-644]. Although a distinction between pride and ambition is certainly possible and may even be helpful, the two do seem inter-related enough that it would not drastically alter the meaning of the passage: certainly overly-ambitious members of the community could be just as destructive. Whatever the negative attitude here discouraged, the cure is to "associate with the lowly things/people" and to "not esteem yourselves wise" (Prov 3:7 LXX, here in the plural). Whether *ταπεινός* is neuter - "things", or masculine - "people", is unclear: the parallelism with *ὕψηλός* favors the former, usage in the NT as a whole favors the latter. Again, this does not involve a drastic change in meaning: obviously humility is what is being encouraged here. Also, this verse again differs from Greek thought, where *ταπεινός* is someone or something base, and certainly not to be associated with, [Dunn, p. 747].

In v. 17, the thought of the passage turns to the Christian's attitude towards retribution in general, which will be further specified in v. 19 as "vengeance". As with blessing and cursing in v. 14, the reader is told not to give back the same treatment as he has received. There is some question in the second half of the verse as to how *ἐνώπιον* should be taken. To take it as the equivalent of a dative, "take thought for the good to all people," [Michel, p. 276], seems not to be supported by Biblical usage, especially the two passages which v. 17 clearly echoes, Prov 3:4 and II Cor 8:21, which clearly refer to "what is noble in the sight of the Lord." Here too it should be rendered as "take thought for what is noble in the sight of all" [RSV - Dunn, p. 748]. Cranfield seems to be over-interpreting when he takes the prepositional phrase with the verb, "take thought, in the sight of all, for what is good (in reality)" [Cranfield, p. 645-646]. (Cranfield seems here to show a post-Holocaust hyper-sensitivity about making sure all Christian ethics are henceforth kept above reproach; it is a fault we can surely forgive.) Certainly the idea of appealing to Christians to at least keep to the "lowest common denominator" of pagan ethics, (i.e. Justice, Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude,) is not an unworthy task, (cf. II Cor 8:21).

In v. 18, another difficult command is given, "live peaceably with all," but unlike any other in the section, this one is given a striking double-qualifier, "if possible, in so far as it depends on you." Paul shows his practical side here, but this should not be seen as an escape clause, [*pace* O'Neill, p. 206]: the Christian still cannot curse, (v. 14), cannot return the same treatment as he has received, (v. 17), and cannot seek revenge on his own, (v. 19). Despite this benign demeanor, it is still possible that he will not be able to "live peaceably" in his community: like Socrates or Jesus, a martyr, although not seeking to harm anyone, is nonetheless not "living peaceably" within his community; only a complete collaborator would be, [Murray, v. II, p. 139-140], (cf. Mt

10:34-36//Lk 12:51-53).

In v. 19, the thought of the passage turns to "vengeance". It is first expressed in the negative command, "Do not avenge yourselves," with the result that the believers will thereby "make room for the wrath (of God)." Vengeance is not to be sought by Christians not because vengeance is bad per se, but because vengeance is the particular prerogative of God. Human attempts at vengeance are therefore acts of hubris and attempts at the usurpation of God's powers; besides that, human attempts at vengeance can never hope to be as effective and devastating as divine retribution. There is the implication that the action is not only sinful, but it is impractical. It is not necessary to assume here that "the wrath" is purely future; as at Rom 1:18, particular acts of retribution may already have begun to be enacted by God against the wicked, [Dunn, p. 749-750]. The negative command is stated, and the reason for it is given in the second part of the verse by means of a scriptural citation, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" (Deut 32:35). (Interestingly, Paul's quote is not exactly the MT nor the LXX. As at Heb 10:30, it is closer to the Targums, and a variant text among the diaspora churches may be supposed, [Cranfield, p. 647; Dunn, p. 749; Käsemann, p. 348-349].)

This pattern of command and scriptural citation is repeated in v. 20, though here the two are one and the same in the positive command, "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head" (Prov 25:21-22). This time, Paul follows the LXX almost exactly. Although it certainly contains a most unnatural and hard to follow ethical demand, no commentator has ever had any problem with the first half of the verse, while the second half has been a bone of contention since patristic times. Chrysostom interpreted the "burning coals" as referring to future divine punishment, [cited by Cranfield, p. 648-649, among others]. On the other hand, Jerome and Augustine interpreted the "burning coals" as burning shame or remorse which might serve to reform or convert the enemy, [cited by Stendahl, p. 346, among others]. Origen gave both interpretations and has therefore been cited by modern commentators on both sides of the issue as supporting their claims, [Stendahl, p. 346; Cranfield, p. 649]. How shall we resolve this ancient dispute?

It seems that the evidence for interpreting "burning coals" as divine punishment is overwhelming. The obvious, graphic imagery points strongly in this direction. Also, in the list he compiled, [Spicq, p. 208,] Spicq observed that in the OT, "burning coals" always mean divine anger, punishment for the wicked, or an evil passion, (2Sam 22:9; Ps 18:9, 13; Ps 140:11; Sir 8:10, 11:32; Prov 6:27-29); the image never has a positive connotation. Why, or even how, could Paul have used it in such a way here? The most obvious answer, (and



in a way the most honest one,) is to state flatly that he meant it in a positive sense because he **MUST** have meant it in a positive sense: "...it is out of the question to interpret the image of heaping burning coals on the head as an aggravation of divine chastisement" [Leenhardt, p. 319]; "...it cannot mean that by the Christian's loving action his enemy will be made to suffer more" [Best, p. 146]. Most commentators are much more coy, however, and advance various arguments. Suggested emendations of the Hebrew text of Prov 25:21-22, [Dahood, p. 19-24; Ramarosan, p. 230-234], are, of course, irrelevant for the interpretation of the LXX or Paul. Also irrelevant are observations about an Egyptian repentance ritual, [Morenz, col. 187-192], which even its proponents are forced to admit Paul (and his audience) knew nothing about, [Klassen, p. 347]. Appeals to Rabbinic interpretation, [Cranfield, p. 649], are not only rather out of character for Christian exegetes, but are also very selective: when referred to the evil impulse, this verse was indeed interpreted by the Rabbis to mean "and the Lord will make him your friend" [quoted by Cranfield, p. 649, and Stendahl, p. 347-348]. But when applied to human enemies, the text was interpreted quite differently: it was interpreted in connection with Esther's entrapment of Haman, and even more graphically, it was compared "With a baker who stood before the bake oven; his enemy comes, he scoops up glowing coals and places them upon his head. His friend comes and he takes out warm bread and gives it to him. The glowing coals and the bread, both come out of the same oven, likewise God dropped coals of fire on the Sodomites and manna upon the Israelites" [quoted by Klassen, p. 344-345].

About the only substantive argument that can be advanced against interpreting "burning coals" as divine punishment is that it does not fit well with the context of the passage as a whole, but most especially that it is disconsonant with v. 21. However, any other interpretation would make v. 20 equally disconsonant with v. 19, where divine vengeance is acknowledged as the way things are and should be. Furthermore, if the enemies of God and his people are punished as a result of the believer's doing good, then this too could be interpreted as what is referred to in v. 21, "overcome evil with good" [Stendahl, p. 353-354]. The image of v. 20 may be shocking, but it is not nearly as out of place in the passage as would be the idea of the enemy's repentance, an idea which never seems to occur in this passage.

I would go even further, however. Although several modern commentators do interpret "burning coals" as divine punishment, [Stendahl, p. 343-355; Piper, p. 114-119; Spicq, p. 207-208], I do not think even they have gone far enough in being honest about what Paul means here. All of them stop short of saying that Paul is here at least tolerating if not encouraging his readers to do a good thing with a "bad" motivation, "...vv 19 and 20 probably

were not intended by Paul to mean: do good deeds to your enemy with the hope of bringing wrath down on him" [Piper, p. 117]. All commentators, no matter how they interpret "burning coals", ultimately seem to agree that it must mean something "good": it is then just a question of how "good" the particular commentator acknowledges divine judgment and punishment to be. The suggestion that v. 20 is really talking about "bad" motivations which can cause some Christians nonetheless to do the right thing seems off-limits.

But is this suggestion so far-fetched? It is, of course, another truism to observe that Paul was not a systematic theologian, but a practical man, a preacher and organizer of churches, who felt hard-pressed by the imminent eschaton. His mottoes would seem to have been, "If it advances the gospel, then do it," and, "If it works, then don't fix it," hardly the trademarks of a Tillich or Barth. Presented with the possibility of encouraging some people who have bad intentions to do the right thing anyway, it seems likely that Paul would have jumped at the chance. He says as much at Phil 1:17-18, "the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice." While it would be far too general to say that NT or Biblical ethics were unconcerned with motives, it seems equally premature to assume that they would have been as concerned with motives as modern thinkers are, dominated as we are by Cartesian mind/body dualism and other insidious modernisms. The above quote from Philipians shows at least nonchalance with regard to motives, as do several parables from the Gospel of Luke: the Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5-8), the Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Lk 16:1-8), and the Parable of the Widow and the Judge (Lk 18:1-5). While the meanings of all three of these parables are hard to come to and cannot be discussed here, they do seem emphatic as to the kind of behavior they seek to encourage, but at least ambiguous or even unconcerned as to the kind of motive or attitude they are encouraging. (It is interesting that all three examples should be parables peculiar to Luke. Perhaps the old pietistic notion that Luke and Paul were close associates could have received some support from this observation of their similarly cavalier attitude toward motives!) Likewise, at Rom 12:20, it hardly seems as inconceivable as some would suggest that Paul is here using an argument aimed at encouraging some people who would hate their enemies no matter what, nonetheless to do the Christian thing and practice kindness toward them.

We have tried to examine the major problems of translation and interpretation in Romans 12:9-21. We may now make some concluding observations about this passage and its interpretation. First, it must be acknowledged that the passage moves freely, (one is constantly tempted to say

"Rabbinically" or "midrashically"), by word associations: any attempt to impose an ingenious organization, strict logic, or pietistic unity on it should be abandoned. Secondly, it is, of course, a very eschatologically oriented set of ethical injunctions: this should constantly be kept in mind. Finally, since it is from the hand of Paul and is so eschatologically oriented, it should always be remembered that it is primarily a practical text, a text which is trying with some urgency to encourage certain types of behavior, a text concerned primarily with what the readers are supposed to do: if motivations were in the author's mind at all, they certainly did not loom as large as they do to the modern mind.

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## **Book Reviews.**

Tim Hamilton, Brian Lennon and Gerry O'Hanlon, *Solidarity - the Missing Link in Irish Society*. Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Dublin 1991. £2.95.

The authors of this book are moved to plead for a new sense of solidarity. They quote Oxford Dictionary definition of solidarity "as holding together, mutual dependence, community of interests, feelings and actions." They discuss factors which would help the development of solidarity, and its resulting impact on "poverty, education and the Republic's relationship with Northern Ireland." The book's four chapters relate solidarity to Civic Society,