

Short Exegetical Essays, 2: Philippians 1,29

Anthony Abela

I became aware of an exegesis problem in this verse when the Gideons International Malta Branch asked the Malta Bible Society, the publisher and the guardian of the text, to insert a small change in their version of the Bible. In the Third Edition of the text (2004; which remained the same from its First edition (1984), the text of Phil 1,29 reads:

*Ghaliex lilkom ingħatat il-grazzja li sservu lil Kristu
mhux biss temmnu fih,
imma saħansitra li tbatu għalih.*

For the Gideons the problem lies with the verbal clause *li sservu lil Kristu* ‘that you serve Christ’ which they say is not found in Saydon and in the English versions. Rev. Prof Peter Paul Saydon had translated the text as follows:¹

*Għax hija grazzja mogħtija lilkom għal Kristu
mhux biss li temmnu fih,
imma wkoll li tbatu għalih*

Comments: 1) One may notice that the two translations are quite close especially where the second and third lines are concerned so that one may safely surmise that Prof Sant had Saydon’s version in front of him as he rendered the Greek text. But with regards the first line, Sant’s translation diverges from that of his mentor on several points: while both kept the passive of the Greek word ἐχαρίσθη, they use a different structure of the passive, with Saydon employing the passive participle *mogħtija* of the verb *ta*² predicated of the subject (the

1. As found in the Second Edition of Prof Saydon’s Bible Translation published in three volumes. This translation is found in *Bibbja Saydon*, 1, Societas Doctrinae Christianae, Malta 1977.
2. Cfr. Joseph Aquilina, *Maltese – English Dictionary*, II, 1380; E. F. Sutcliffe, *A Grammar of the Maltese Language*, Oxford 1936. 1950, 139.

personal pronoun feminine *hija*) together with the nominal *grazzja*: ‘for it is a grace given to you...’. Sant maintained the nominal *grazzja*, ‘grace’ to render the verb ἐχαρίσθη, but in his version *grazzja* is the subject of the clause: The verb *ingħatat* is the perfect passive of the same verb *ta*: ‘for the grace was given to you.....’.

2) The two translators employ the same possessive pronoun attached to the preposition *lil* ‘to’ to mark the beneficiaries which finally refer to the addressees; yet the two translators use a different word order. In Sant the preposition *lil* + the suffix of the second person plural *-kom* is fronted to after the causal conjunction *ghaliex* probably with the intention of giving it emphasis just like the Greek: ὅτι ὑμῶν ἐχαρίσθη ‘for to you it was granted....’ *Ghaliex lilkom ingħatat il-grazzja....*’ The problem remains as to whether word order in Maltese works in the same manner as in the Hellenistic Greek.

3) But the main difference regards the rendering of the phrase in the Greek text τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ. This text consists of a prepositional phrase defined by the article τὸ. Saydon had parsed it as a phrase and rendered it with another phrase *ghal Kristu* ‘for/on behalf of Christ’. He was not alone in this parsing:

‘quia vobis donatum est **pro Christo** non solum ut in eum credatis sed ut etiam pro illo patiamini’(Vulgate).

‘For unto you it is given **in the behalf of Christ**, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake’(Authorised Version)³

‘For it has been granted **on behalf of Christ** not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him’(NIV).⁴

Sant instead translates the phrase by a clause: *li sservu lil Kristu*, ‘that you may serve Christ’. Nor was he alone in this exegesis. I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida in their *A Translators Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*⁵ which Sant probably had, suggested that “ ‘In behalf of Christ’ is to taken in the sense of

3. *Holy Bible. Standard Text Edition*, ‘Cum Privilegio’, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 (?)

4. *Holy Bible. New International Version*, International Bible Society, Colorado Springs 1984.

5. United Bible Societies, New York 1977, 43.

serving Christ.” And a number of modern translations were following this lead; here we cite one sample:

‘Car Dieu vous a accordé la faveur de servir le Christ, non seulement en croyant en lui, mais encore en souffrant pour lui’(BE).⁶

Such translation requires that the prepositional phrase τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ be taken as being syntactically equal to the two prepositional clauses that follow it:

οὐ μόνον τὸ εἰς αὐτὸν πιστεῦειν
ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ πάσχειν

The parallelism between these two clauses is clear: they are both introduced by an adverbial phrase expressing contrast; they are defined in both cases by the article τὸ; in each there is a preposition governing the personal pronoun αὐτός that refers back to Χριστός in the phrase under study. These back references add to the cohesion of the clause as a whole. Sant’s exegesis takes the phrase τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ to be a case of ellipsis where the verb in the infinitive is dropped and needs to be gleaned from the context. This would explain the similarity in syntax between this phrase and the prepositional clauses that follow. As we have seen, I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida derived the verb ‘to serve’ from the preposition ὑπὲρ; and Sant followed their lead. But is the author of the letter contrasting this prepositional phrase to the two prepositional clauses listed above? This is far from clear. The two initial adverbial clauses somehow contrast the two clauses to each other but not to the phrase, which seems to be playing a different syntactical role in the sentence as a whole. Differently to the two prepositional clauses which seem to be governed by the verb ἐχαρίσθη, the phrase τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ qualifies the same verb adverbially. The addressees were granted the grace not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake. But this grace was given ‘for the sake of Christ’ The syntactical subject of the verb ἐχαρίσθη is not given as the verb is impersonal though the semantic subject of the verb is ‘God’ that is emphatically present in the phrase that comes just before this clause: καὶ τοῦτο ἀπὸ θεοῦ, ‘and this from God’. Of course this phrase looks

6. *La Bible Expliquée*, Alliance Biblique Universelle, Paris 2004.

back to what is said in verse 28. But it also furnishes the semantic subject to the following clause, not the syntactical subject though.

Some conclusions

a) While the literary procedure of contrast is used in this verse, this serves to tie together the two prepositional clauses in the second half of the verse; as the structure of the two clauses shows, it is these that are contrasted, not them to the prepositional phrase τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ. This means that Sant's and BE's parsing, uncritically relying upon I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida's parsing, who in turn relied upon William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1959 cannot be judged positively: Paul is not contrasting the concept of 'serving Christ' to that of 'believing in him' or 'suffering for him'. Besides, the present writer is not convinced that we are justified in 'translating' the preposition ὑπὲρ by the verb 'to serve' as the UBS *The Translators' Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New York 1977) suggests.

b) But nor is Saydon's version without its problems. He translates the phrase τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ literally, ignoring of course the article which is defining the phrase: *ghal Kristu* just like Vulgate *pro Christo* and *on behalf of Christ* of NIV. But this parsing does not account for the partial parallels between the phrase and the prepositional clauses mentioned above including the initial article τὸ which in the context seems to assume the role of a demonstrative pronoun. This phrase seems to be an emphatic qualification of the verb, God granted you, this on behalf of Christ; this emphasis is completely missing from those versions like Saydon's or the NIV's who rendered the phrase as a qualification of the main verb ἐχαρίσθη. Such translations may be considered as cases of undertranslation.

c) They are cases of under-translations those versions which decided to ignore the presence in the text of the phrase τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ because they do not know how to parse it: "... car c'est pour sa faveur qu'il vous a été donné, non pas seulement du croire a Christ, mais encore de souffrir pour lui" (NBJ) or "Porque a usteres se les concedido no solo creer en Christo, sino también sufrir por el"(NVI). Those versions instead which parse the phrase as adverbial seem rather queer though perhaps possible. TOB offers such parsing: "Car il vous a fait la grace, à l'égard de Christ, non seulement de croire en lui mais

encore de souffrir pour lui.⁷ But is the writer simply directing the mind of his audience to think only of Christ when they are told that God granted them the privileges mentioned then in the two prepositional clauses that are governed by the verb ἐχαρίσθη?

d) The ultimate solution being proposed in this paper for this verse considers the phrase τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ as an emphatic adverbial one qualifying the main verb ἐχαρίσθη of the causal clause: ‘and this for the sake of Christ’; secondly, the two prepositional clauses each being opened by the article τὸ coming just after the contrasting conjunctions, are meant to stand in contrast to each other but not to the prepositional phrase that qualifies the verb ἐχαρίσθη, as the position of the contrasting conjunctions shows.

Anthony Abela
Faculty of Theology
Department of Holy Scriptures
University of Malta
Msida, Malta

7. *La Bible*. Traduction Oecumenique, Paris 1995.

