

Translation Nuances in Hebrews 9:12: A Look at "The Holy Place"

Question: Is it known why the NIV and NKJV have a different meaning regarding the Sanctuary for Hebrews 9:12 from KJV?

A notable difference in the rendering of Hebrews 9:12 between the King James Version (KJV) and newer translations like the New International Version (NIV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) lies in the description of the Sanctuary Christ entered. While the KJV states He entered "the holy place," the NIV and NKJV specify "the Most Holy Place." This distinction arises from the translation of the Greek phrase *τὰ ἅγια* (ta hagia) and reflects differing translation philosophies and interpretations of the theological context.

The Verse in Question:

KJV: "Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the **holy place**, having obtained eternal redemption for us."

NIV: "He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the **Most Holy Place** once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption."

NKJV: "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the **Most Holy Place** once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."

The core of the issue is the Greek term *τὰ ἅγια* (ta hagia). Grammatically, it is a plural noun, which literally translates to "the holy places" or "the sanctuary" as a whole, encompassing both the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place of the earthly tabernacle.

The translators of the **King James Version** opted for a more literal, or formal equivalence, rendering of *τὰ ἅγια* as "the holy place." This approach prioritizes a word-for-word translation from the original Greek. The use of the singular "place" in the KJV can be understood as referring to the entire sacred precinct.

In contrast, the **NIV and NKJV** employ a more dynamic equivalence philosophy in this instance. This approach seeks to convey the meaning and intent of the original text in contemporary language, even if it means not translating word-for-word. The translators of these versions interpret the context of Hebrews 9 as pointing specifically to the Day of Atonement ritual. On this day, the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place, the innermost chamber of the tabernacle, to make atonement for sins. Since Hebrews 9 draws a parallel between Christ's work and the Day of Atonement, the NIV and NKJV translators concluded that "the Most Holy Place" is the intended meaning in this context, providing what they see as a clearer and more specific rendering for the modern reader.

Scholarly debate continues regarding the precise meaning of τὰ ἅγια in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Some scholars argue that the author intentionally used the plural form to refer to the entire heavenly sanctuary, of which the earthly tabernacle was a copy. In this view, Christ's entry is into the very presence of God in heaven, a reality that transcends the physical divisions of the earthly tabernacle. Others maintain that the strong allusions to the Day of Atonement throughout Hebrews 9 make the specific reference to the "Most Holy Place" the most likely intended meaning.

In summary, the difference in wording between the KJV and the NIV/NKJV in Hebrews 9:12 is not due to a discrepancy in the underlying Greek manuscripts. Rather, it stems from different approaches to translation and interpretation. The KJV offers a more literal translation of the Greek term, while the NIV and NKJV provide a more interpretive rendering based on the theological context of Christ's high priestly ministry as the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. Both translations have valid scholarly and theological reasoning behind their choices.

Question: Are there other ways to find the message the inspired Bible writer gives, in order to help with the translation and interpretation biases?

That is an excellent and crucial question for any serious student of the Bible. Moving beyond a surface reading of a single translation to understand the author's original message is the heart of responsible biblical study. This practice is formally known as **exegesis**, which means "to draw out" the meaning from the text, as opposed to **eisegesis**, which is "to read into" the text our own ideas.

Yes, there are several time-tested methods to help you get closer to the original writer's intent and mitigate the biases inherent in any translation or interpretation. Here are some of the most effective approaches, ranging from simple to more advanced.

1. Compare Multiple Bible Translations

This is the most accessible step for anyone. By comparing how different translation committees handled the same verse, you can quickly identify areas of complexity or ambiguity in the original text.

- **Group translations by philosophy:**

- **Formal Equivalence (Word-for-Word):** These try to adhere as closely as possible to the words and sentence structure of the original language. Examples include the King James Version (KJV), New King James Version (NKJV), New American Standard Bible (NASB), and English Standard Version (ESV).
- **Dynamic Equivalence (Thought-for-Thought):** These prioritize conveying the original thought or meaning in natural, contemporary English, even if it requires departing from a literal word-for-word rendering. The New International Version (NIV) is the most famous example.
- **Paraphrase:** These are not translations in the strict sense but restatements of the biblical message in very contemporary language to maximize readability. Examples include *The Message* and the *Living Bible* (NLT is a hybrid that started as a paraphrase).

How it helps: When all the translations from the formal and dynamic groups say roughly the same thing, you can be confident in the core meaning. When they differ, as in Hebrews 9:12, it's a flag indicating a complex Greek word or a significant interpretive choice that warrants deeper investigation.

2. Engage with the Original Languages (Even without being a scholar)

You don't need to be fluent in Greek or Hebrew to get valuable insights. Modern tools have made the original languages accessible to everyone.

- **Use a Strong's Concordance:** Every major word in the KJV and NASB (among others) is assigned a "Strong's Number." You can look up this number to find the original Hebrew or Greek word, its basic definition, and every other place it's used in the Bible.
- **Online Tools:** Websites like **Bible Hub** and **Blue Letter Bible** are invaluable. You can view a verse in multiple English translations and then click on a word to see an "interlinear" view, which shows the original Greek/Hebrew word, its Strong's number, and its range of possible meanings.

How it helps (using our example): Looking up "holy place" in Hebrews 9:12 on Bible Hub would immediately show you the Greek *τὰ ἅγια* (ta hagia). You would see that it is plural ("the holy places") and that translators and scholars debate whether it refers to the whole sanctuary or specifically the Most Holy Place. This knowledge instantly illuminates *why* the translations differ and empowers you to study the context yourself.

3. Emphasize Context Above All

This is arguably the most important principle of interpretation. A verse without its context is a pretext

for almost any idea.

- **Literary Context:** Read the verses before and after. Read the entire chapter. Read the whole book. Understand the author's flow of thought. What is the main argument of the book of Hebrews? (Answer: To show the superiority of Christ and the New Covenant over the Old Covenant system, to encourage Jewish Christians not to abandon their faith). This purpose governs the meaning of every verse within it.
- **Historical and Cultural Context:** Who was the author writing to? What were their circumstances? What would a term like "sacrifice," "covenant," or "high priest" have meant to a first-century Jewish Christian? For example, understanding the details of the Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus 16 is essential to understanding the argument in Hebrews 9.
- **Redemptive-Historical Context:** Where does this passage fit in the overarching story of the Bible (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration)? How does this part of the New Testament relate to the promises and foreshadowing of the Old Testament?

4. Use Reliable Study Tools Wisely

- **Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias:** These are excellent for understanding historical, cultural, and theological concepts (e.g., looking up "Tabernacle" or "Atonement").
- **Commentaries:** Commentaries are books written by scholars to explain the meaning of a biblical text. They can be incredibly helpful but remember: **they are also interpretations**. The key is to consult multiple commentaries from different scholarly perspectives to see the range of possible interpretations and the evidence for each. Don't let one commentary become your only guide.

5. Let Scripture Interpret Scripture (The Analogy of Faith)

This principle assumes that the Bible, as God's inspired word, is internally consistent. Therefore, clear and straightforward passages should be used to help interpret passages that are less clear. If an interpretation of an obscure verse seems to contradict the plain teaching of Scripture elsewhere, it's likely that the interpretation is flawed.

By combining these methods, you create a system of checks and balances. You're not relying on a single translation's bias or your own personal bias. Instead, you are using language, context, history, and the full counsel of Scripture to triangulate the most faithful understanding of the original author's inspired message.

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