



10) Chapters 11 & 12

Two long chapters .. and a wealth of small details in the Greek. Nothing major has been lost in translation, but together the verses below give an idea of the extra depth of meaning always there for those who read the Gospel in the language it was originally written in – or indeed who understand Jesus’ and his disciples’ Aramaic which probably underlies John’s Greek in many places.

11. 3 “The sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, **he whom you love** is ill.’”

A little opportunity to refresh our memory of the various words for love. This one is *phileō*; so a less stilted translation would be “Lord, your friend is ill”. (But the distinctions aren’t always firm. So in verse 5 (“though Jesus **loved** Martha and her sister and Lazarus”), the word is *agapaō* with only a slight difference of meaning.

11. 11-12 “After saying this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has **fallen asleep**, but I am going there to **awaken** him.’ The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has **fallen asleep**, he will be all right.’”

It’s not just knowing Greek vocabulary that helps; to know how the words were used in the culture of the time is just as important. Although to “fall asleep” was a common Greek, and Jewish, euphemism for death, only Jesus uses “awaken” to mean to raise from the dead – but there again perhaps only he had reason to! (Notice how even the disciples misunderstand what Jesus is saying.)

11. 15 “For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may **believe**.”

Another little bit of revision. Two points we’ve often noticed before: the range of meanings of *pisteuō* and the use of the simple past (‘aorist’) tense – “so that you may come to have faith”.

11. 16 “**Thomas**, who was called the **Twin**, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’”

The Aramaic for ‘twin’, *Th ōmā*, was never used as a personal name – but Jews adopted the similar Greek name *Thōmas* as a nickname. An early Christian tradition says that Thomas looked very like Jesus!

11.33 “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was **greatly disturbed** in spirit and **deeply moved**.”

Translating emotions from language to another is always difficult. “Greatly disturbed” (*enebrimēsato*) always has connotations of indignation – and Jesus is often described as feeling that way when confronted with sin or sickness. “Deeply moved” (*etaraxen heauton*) is an unusually strong phrase.

11. 47, 52 “The chief priests ... **called a meeting** of the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? But Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to **gather into one** the dispersed children of God.’”

This is a typical fourth Gospel play on words. John uses the same verb (*synagō*, whence the word ‘synagogue’) to describe the Jewish leaders convening to plot a death and Jesus gathering the Gentiles into life. It’s a word that always seems to have depth in this Gospel: at the end of the feeding of the five thousand Jesus said “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost” – and the early Christians called the first part of the Communion service a ‘*synaxis*’.

12.3 “Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of **pure** nard...”

What do translators do when they find a word they don’t know the meaning of? They make an intelligent guess. ‘Pure’ here is their guess for *pistikos*, a word found nowhere else in surviving writing of the time. They’re obviously guessing it’s an adjective from *pistis*, ‘faith’ – it’s ‘true’ nard. But it might just as likely refer to ointment made with *pistachio* oil!

12.13 “**Hosanna!** Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Equally difficult are ‘untranslatable’ words – phrases for which there’s no ready equivalent in another language. Or perhaps it’s just because it’s so vivid and memorable that the Gospel writers don’t usually translate the Aramaic *Hosanna* (just as they don’t translate *Amen* or *Alleluia* or *Maranatha*). These have all become liturgical words, and just as John didn’t translate them into Greek, so we don’t translate them into English.

12. 25, 27 “Those who love their **life** lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ... Now my **soul** is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour?’”

The church has a habit of making religious English words out of ordinary Greek ones. An ‘angel’ for example is just the normal Greek word for a messenger (*angelos*). Nowhere has this led to more confusion than with the Greek word *psychē*. This is usually nowadays translated ‘life’ – the good shepherd lays down his *psychē* for the sheep, for example. But in earlier centuries this word was usually translated ‘soul’ – and a whole theology grew up around this almost-imaginary entity. It means our inner self, our true self – quite simply the real ‘us’.

12.35 “Jesus said to them, ‘The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not **overtake** you.’”

We finish by coming full circle from our last session. Do you remember the fifth verse of the Gospel prologue – “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not **overcome** it.”? The same word, *katalambanein*, occurs just once more in the Gospel, and this time is applied to us. We need to walk with Jesus, the Light of the World, if the darkness is not to triumph.