

# And on Earth, Peace...

**W**hat on earth did the angels say in Luke 2:14? Was it "on earth peace, good will toward men" (KJV), or "on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (RSV), or "on earth his peace for men on whom his favour rests,"<sup>1</sup> or "peace upon earth among men of goodwill"?<sup>2</sup> The brief song of praise by the host of heaven immediately after the announcement of the birth of Jesus has indeed been translated in widely different ways. See the other suggestions in *The New Testament from 26 Translations* (Zondervan, 1967).

It may surprise you to find such a wide difference of opinion about so few words. This look at the matter may help you understand the problem and see the difficulties in the passage.

First, the last word of Luke 2:14 in the Greek New Testament, translated "good will" in the King James Version, appears with two *different* endings in the existing Greek texts. To be technical, one of the endings places the word in the nominative case and makes it coordinate with "peace." This position is reflected in the King James Version.

The other ending has the noun in the genitive case, the case of possession and relationships. This usage puts the idea in "goodwill" in an entirely different light. The idea then would not be "peace and good will among men" but "peace among men *of good will*."

Both readings appear in ancient Greek manuscripts, but the weight of evidence supports the genitive case, the just-mentioned translation. The editors of the major Greek texts—Westcott and Hort, Nestle, and the editors of the American Bible Society text—all give the genitive case as the original reading.

A careful study of the verse discounts the nominative case also on the basis of the meaning of peace itself. "Peace among men" and "good will among men" would be practically the same idea. No new idea is added in this type of construction. Also, the two

words are not connected by a conjunction in the Greek text and are in fact separated by the words "on earth."

More significantly, the essential pattern of the song of the angels seems broken when the second half of the song has two subjects. Notice the three parallel elements:

|              |                  |                                    |
|--------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Glory</b> | <b>to God</b>    | <b>in the highest<br/>(heaven)</b> |
| <b>and</b>   |                  |                                    |
| <b>Peace</b> | <b>among men</b> | <b>on earth.</b>                   |

If the song has any balance, this sketch makes it apparent. The angels gave glory to God in the highest. "Highest" is actually a plural word which indicates the "highest places," that is, in heavenly courts. After giving glory to God in heaven, they announced peace among men on earth. The word translated "good will" almost certainly is intended to modify—to explain or present a qualifying comment—about the nature of those men to whom peace has been announced.

The second major problem is in how to translate the shade of emphasis in the word "good will," *eudokias*. The noun is from the verb *eudokeo* which means "it seems good" (Luke 12:32), "it is well pleasing" (Matt. 3:17), and "it pleased" (Gal. 1:15). The noun is translated "good pleasure" (Eph. 1:5,9; Phil. 2:13) and "good will" (Phil. 1:15).

The consistent usage of this word in the Gospels points in the direction of the meaning as "well pleasing to God." Note that each time God spoke from heaven about his Son, he used the root idea in this word. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am *well pleased*" (Matt. 17:5).

The frequency of its use in this manner lends weight to the idea that it should be given that force in Luke  
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2:14. The word should not be translated to convey the idea that God brought goodwill to earth among men (though he certainly is the source of goodwill!), but it should be phrased so as to support the meaning that Christ's coming brings peace to men who are pleasing to God. The most reasonable conclusion is that the men who please God are those who will respond to his Son in repentance and faith.

One other factor adds to the difficulty of translating the passage. The words themselves in the beautiful and beloved King James Version have become so much a part of our Christmas heritage that it seems like heresy to change the familiar words, "and on earth peace, good will toward men." But, the facts point to

the idea that the angels were declaring "on earth peace among men well pleasing to God."

Whatever you may decide in your study of this verse, keep the overall thrust of the song in proper focus. The coming of God's Son to be the Saviour from sin was such a tremendous happening that it caused the angels to ascribe glory to God for doing it and to proclaim peace to all men who would respond to Jesus in a way that pleased God. ○

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