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The First Christmas Carol

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NOTES and COMMENT

The First Christmas Carol

Since the year 1947, the attention of biblical scholars throughout the world has been focused upon a number of remarkable old Hebrew manuscripts, which, after having lain concealed for centuries in the hills that rim the northwestern coast of the Dead Sea, have only recently been brought to light. Qualified authorities are generally agreed that they date from the period between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. A number of the manuscripts are transcriptions of books or portions of books of the Old Testament. The others contain non-scriptural religious writings.

In one of the manuscripts of this latter class, there occurs a phrase which seems to shed new light upon an old problem. Set in its context, and rendered rather freely into English, it reads as follows:

I know that there is not to be found among men either justice or perfection. All the works of justice are the prerogative of God most High; the way of a man is not secure unless he be under divine direction. God's part it is to render perfect the way of men that they may know all the works He has wrought through His omnipotence, and the mercies He has poured out upon all the *sons of His good will*.

The writer who called attention to this text recently in a German periodical, is inclined to believe that the phrase "sons of His good will" was an idiomatic expression in fairly common use among religious sects of the Jews at the time of Our Lord.

It is quite similar to an expression which occurs in the New Testament and which has given rise to the "old problem" referred to above.

When the glad tidings of Our Lord's birth had been announced to the shepherds, the angels, before departing heavenward, let fall a flood of melody upon the sleeping hills of Bethlehem. St. Luke has recorded the words (not the melody, unfortunately) of this first Christmas Carol in the second chapter of his Gospel. It is a seemingly simple refrain yet its translation has occasioned considerable discussion among biblical commentators. By an odd paradox, a song of peace has become a source of discord.

The discussion centers around a single word in the text — the Greek word *eudokia*, "good will". It is uncertain what form of that word Luke employed originally when recording the song of the angels, and there is further uncertainty as to its precise meaning in its context.

For many years Catholic and Protestant versions were sharply divided on the point. The old Catholic, Douay-Rheims version translated the text as a distich:

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men of good will.

The King James version, and most of the older Protestant translations, rendered the text as a tristich:

Glory to God in the highest,
on earth peace,
good will to men.

The source of this discrepancy can be traced back to the Greek manuscripts themselves. Several of them contain the reading *eudokia*. It is this reading which the Protestant versions follow when they translate "good will to men". Other manuscripts, less numerous but more reliable, have not *eudokia*, the nominative, but *eudokias*, the genitive. The Catholic versions, following the lead of the Latin Vulgate, have chosen to follow this reading, and so translate the word by the English genitive, "men of good will."

Recent Protestant translations reveal a tendency to abandon

the reading *eudokia* in favor of *eudokias* probably because of its more reliable manuscript support. Thus we find in the 1952 edition of the *Revised Standard Version*,

Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace among men with whom He is
pleased.

Similarly Professor Goodspeed in the *American Translation*, published by the University of Chicago Press, has:

Glory to God in heaven, and on earth!
Peace to the men He favors.

Modern Catholic versions have also changed the rendering of this text. Monsignor Knox for example translates:

Glory to God in high heaven
and peace on earth to men that are God's friends.

while the Westminster Version of Father Lattey reads:

Glory to God in the highest,
and peace upon earth among men of His good pleasure.

With regard to these recent translations it may be noted: 1) That they all agree in accepting the reading *eudokias*, that is, the genitive form of the word rather than the nominative, and that all render the refrain as a distich. In this they are in agreement with the early Catholic and against the early Protestant versions. 2) They are also in accord in considering the "good will" in question, to be not man's, as the Catholic version might lead one to think, but God's.

If the German scholar referred to above is correct in seeing a parallel between the phrase in Luke and the idiom in the Dead Sea Manuscript, the recent versions receive corroboration. The correct reading would be not "good will to men," but "men of good will." And the good will is God's, for the Dead Sea text makes this quite explicit by adding "His"—"sons of His good will."

But a certain ambiguity still remains. Precisely what is

meant by the phrase "men of (God's) good will"? Does it mean those who are walking according to His holy will, and with whom consequently "He is pleased"? Or does it refer to a certain restricted group of men, the predestined and elect, whom God chooses to favor, independently of their dispositions? Or finally does it mean all men, without restriction, who though by nature, as Paul says, "sons of wrath," on Christmas Day as a result of Christ's coming are transformed into "sons of His good will"?

The recent translations quoted above do not remove the ambiguity. Rather they seem to perpetuate it. Nor does the Dead Sea Manuscript, though it sheds considerable light upon the correct *reading* of the text, decisively clarify its *meaning*. If the meaning of Luke's phrase were to be determined solely on the basis of its use (in the corresponding Hebrew idiom) in the Manuscript, the second of the possible meanings listed would have to be accepted as correct, namely, that the "men of good will" are a restricted group of God's elect. For the context in which the idiom occurs stresses the idea of man's insufficiency and God's power. Of himself man cannot please God. Perfection and all the works of justice are God's alone. The "sons of His good will" are the men upon whom He has chosen to pour out His mercies even though they of themselves are utterly unworthy. These men form an elect group, chosen to be the recipients of God's choicest favors.

To accept such a meaning for Luke's phrase would intrude a note of exclusiveness, which however well it may accord with Jewish thought at the time of Our Lord, is quite alien to the general tone of Luke's Gospel. Luke is not at all an exclusivist. He is a universalist. He is the preacher of "salvation for all men." The Christ he depicts is the merciful Saviour of the human race, not merely of the Jewish race, or of any other "chosen" people. It would seem better therefore to interpret the refrain

Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace among men of good will,

as proclaiming a message of mercy from God on high, a mes-

sage and a mercy that were for *all* men without distinction; as proclaiming God's all-embracing love and His sovereign will to save all men through His Son.

Luke learned much from the preaching of his great-hearted master St. Paul, the Apostle of the Nations. And it is Paul himself, perhaps, who gives us the best interpretation of the angels' song, when in the Epistle to the Ephesians, he writes: "But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once afar off have been brought near through the blood of Christ. *For He Himself is our peace . . . And coming He announced the good tidings of peace to you who were afar off, and to those who were near; because through Him we have access in one Spirit to the Father.*"

The Infant Jesus, uniting in Himself human nature and the Divine, is the bond of peace between God and men. In Him and through Him, *all men* though by nature "sons of wrath" have received the power to become "sons of His good will." With joyous hearts and ringing voices then can men echo the angels' carol on the first Christmas Day, "Glory to God in the highest"!

J. J. KAVANAGH

Communism, The Church, Mission Methods

Recently Senator Claro M. Recto delivered a striking address at the Ateneo de Manila on the occasion of the symposium: "Asia and the West." First quoting scattered syntheses of Arnold Toynbee, foremost contemporary historian, on relations between Asia and the West and especially Toynbee's praise of the methods of Jesuit missionaries in India and China in the 16th and 17th centuries, he continued with more concrete details from a book of a French missionary expelled from Communist China, Father Francis Dufay, who from vivid personal experiences under the Reds has stressed insistently