

Judgment, Condemnation, and Polysemy!



By Steve Combs

The job of a Bible translator or interpreter is fraught with dangers. Suppose that in a certain verse the KJV may use one word and another English version or a foreign translation from the Received text uses a different word. Many of us would simply choose the KJV word. But, how do we answer a critic when both translated words came from the same Greek word in the Received text and both translations are equally valid? This happens often in the New Testament. Many Greek words, like words in any language, have more than one meaning. This is called *Polysemy*, the principle that words have multiple meanings. But, how are you to choose between the meanings?

This problem is found many times in the New Testament. One very prominent example is found in John 5:24.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

(John 5:24)

This seems to be a straight forward and clear verse. It is in perfect accord with the teachings about salvation in the entire Bible. However, there is an issue with the word condemnation. Of course there is a problem in the modern English versions, you say. However, the problem is not just that the New King James and other English versions translate the Greek word *krisis* as judgment, rather than condemnation, but early Received Text Bibles also translate it that way. The Tyndale, Coverdale, Bishops, and Geneva translations all use the words condemnation or damnation. On the other hand, the 1744 French Ostervald Bible says “judgment” (that is, the text as available on e-sword.net; the 2018 Revision of the Ostervald by Pastor Mario Monette says “condemnation”). The 1545 Martin Luther German translation uses the word Gericht, which means “court or judgment.” J. P. Green’s so-called “literal” translation says “judgment.” Even the King James has a difference in how it translates *krisis*. In John 5:29, the KJV translates *krisis* as “judgment.” Then, again the word is used in verse 30 and translated “damnation.”

How are you to know which is correct? Once again, some of you would point to the way the KJV does it and say the KJV is right. I also agree the KJV translated this correctly. But, how are you to *explain*

it? How would you explain the difference in how the KJV translated this word to a young or ignorant Christian? How do you *know* which is right?

It's easier than you think. But, many miss it.

First, the Greek word, *krisis*, is an example of *polysemy*. It has multiple meanings which depend on the context. According to the *Complete Word Study Dictionary*, the word means both "the act of judging" and "sentence pronounced." *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says it "primarily denotes 'a separating,' then, 'a decision' ". *Thayer's Greek Definitions* tells us the word means a "trial or contest" and an "opinion or decision." So, it has more than one meaning. It means the process of examining someone in court (judgment) and the sentence or decision made after the examination (either condemnation or acquittal). Therefore, on its bare surface, both translations are technically correct.

So, how are we to choose between the definitions? Many words have multiple meanings. The only way to choose which definition applies in a given place in a document depends entirely on *context*. In the Bible, that contextual information may come from the verse in which we find the word or it may come from the nearby verses or even other chapters in the same book. It may even be found in other books.

The context of John 5:24 and the word *krisis* is an example of the last one and it depends on a correct understanding of the verse itself.

The subject of John 5:24 is *eternal life* and *how one obtains it*. Salvation depends on 1) hearing the word and 2) believing it. By doing this you ensure your eternal safety. The view of this verse is eternity. So, the result of believing is 1) you have eternal life right now and 2) you will never be condemned. That is the teaching of the verse as it stands in the KJV. However, the translations that use "judgment" do not guarantee a freedom from condemnation, but they guarantee freedom from judgment.

You may say, isn't freedom from judgment the same as freedom from condemnation? It is not the same; however, freedom from judgment may result in freedom from condemnation. Using "judgment" in John 5:24 is saying that believers will never go through the process of being judged. The real difficulty is that the statement, "you shall never come into judgment," **is not true**. In fact, it is a flat out lie. Moreover, it sets up a contradiction in Scripture. The greater Scriptural context contradicts the idea that you, as a believer, will *never* come into judgment. The proof of this is found in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." We will be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ, but we will never be condemned. Therefore, all of us who have believed are going to a future judgment. It cannot be avoided.

So, the decision of which definition of *Krisis* to use is settled by cross references. To translate *krisis* as "judgment" in John 5:24 is to create a contradiction in Scripture. This is a danger that all translators must carefully avoid.

