Note by JRW: The following iconoclastic essay is taken from the first part of the appendix to David Myatt's *Mercvrii Trismegisti Pymander de potestate et sapientia dei: A Translation and Commentary*, published in 2013 (ISBN 978-1495470684). The appendix is titled *Some Examples Regarding Translation and Questions of Interpretation*. All translations are by Myatt and the book was published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No-Derivatives License. Since Myatt in the essay references his translation of the Gospel of John, it should be noted that in his *Some Questions For DWM (2014)* he - in a reply to a question about his Greek translations - replied that "my interest in translating the Gospel of John dates back to my time as a Catholic monk, and discussions there regarding the meaning of terms such as λόγος. It was those discussions that led me to read, for the first time and there in the monastery, the Latin text of the Corpus Hermeticum by Marsilius Ficinus [...] In respect of the Gospel of John, I am albeit somewhat slowly continuing to work on it, and do hope – θεοί and Μοῖραι τρίμορφοι μνήμονές τ᾽ Ἐρινύες permitting – to complete and publish my translation of the whole Gospel together with notes and commentary, although completion and publication are still several years away." He has so far only published *Notes On The Gospel According to John, Chapter 1 vv.1-5.*

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Interpretation and The Question of Sin

I incline toward the view that in translations into English it is often best to avoid words that impose or seem to impose a meaning on an ancient text especially if the sense that an English word now imputes is the result of centuries of assumptions or opinions or influences and thus has acquired a modern meaning, or an interpretation [1], somewhat at variance with the culture, the milieu, of the time when the text that is being translated was written. Especially so in the matter of religious or spiritual texts where so many people rely or seem to rely on the translations, the interpretations, of others and where certain interpretations seem to have become fixed. [2]

Thus, it may be helpful if one can suggest, however controversial or iconoclastic they may seem in their time, reasoned alternatives for certain words important for a specific and a general understanding of a particular text, and helpful because such alternatives might enable a new appreciation of such a text, as if for instance one is reading it for the first time with the joy of discovery.

For example, one of the prevalent English words used in translations of the New Testament, and one of the words now commonly associated with revealed religions such as Christianity and Islam, is sin. A word which now imputes and for centuries has imputed a particular and at times somewhat strident if not harsh moral attitude, with sinners starkly contrasted with the righteous and the saved, and with sin, what is evil, what is perverse, to be shunned and shudderingly avoided.

One of the oldest usages of the word sin - so far discovered - is in the c. 880 CE translation of the c. 525 CE text *Consolatio Philosophiae,* a translation attributed to King Ælfred. Here, the Old English spelling of syn is used:

> Þæt is swiðe dyslic & swiðe micel syn þæt mon þæs wenan scyle be Gode

The context of the original Latin of Boethius [3] is cogitare, in relation to a dialogue about goodness and God, so that the sense of the Latin is that it is incorrect - an error, wrong - to postulate/claim/believe certain things about God. There is thus here, in Boethius, as in early English texts such as Beowulf [4], the sense of doing what was wrong, of committing an error, of making a mistake, of being at fault; at most of overstepping the bounds, of transgressing limits imposed by others, and thus being 'guilty' of such an infraction, a sense which the suggested etymology of the word syn implies: from the Latin sons, sontis.

Thus, this early usage of the English word syn seems to impart a sense somewhat different from what we now associate with the word sin, which is why in my translation of John 8.7 I eschew that much overused and now often pejorative word in order to try and convey something of the numinous original:

> So, as they continued to ask [for an answer] he straightened himself, saying to them: Let he who has never made a mistake [Αναμαρτητος] throw the first stone at her.

> ὡς δὲ ἐπέμενον ἐρωτῶντες αὐτόν, ἀνέκυψεν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ὁ ἀναμάρτητος ὑμῶν πρῶτος ἐπ᾽ αὐτὴν βαλέτω λίθον.

Jesus here is not, in my view, sermonizing about sin, as a puritan preacher might, and as if he is morally superior to and has judged the sinners. Instead, he is rather gently and as a human pointing out an obvious truth about our human nature; explaining, in v.11, that he has not judged her conduct:

> ἡ δὲ εἶπεν· οὐδείς, κύριε. εἶπεν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· οὐδὲ ἐγώ σε κατακρίνω· πορεύου, ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μηκέτι ἁμάρτανε

> [And] she answered, No one, my Lord. Whereupon Jesus replied Neither do I judge [κατακρίνω] you, therefore go, and avoid errors such as those. [5]

Such a translation avoids the rather contradictory nature of most other translations which have Jesus clearly stating that he also does not judge her but then have him go on to say that she should 'sin no more' with the obvious implication that he has indeed judged her in that in his judgement she had indeed sinned before.

Understood and appreciated thus, sans the now somewhat culturally-biased word sin, these passages from the gospel according to John - together with passages such as Luke 19.10 and Romans 13.10 [6] - perhaps usefully summarize the evangel of Jesus of Nazareth; the (in my view) rather human message of avoiding judging others because we ourselves are prone to error; the message of love, and the message of redemption (forgiveness) for those who in the past have made mistakes but who have thereafter tried to avoid making such mistakes again, those hitherto perhaps damaged or lost.

In respect of ἁμαρτάνω [7] consider, for example, Matthew 18.21:

> Τότε προσελθὼν ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν [αὐτῷ] Κύριε, ποσάκις ἁμαρτήσει εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; ἕως ἑπτάκις
>
> Peter then approached [προσέρχομαι] him saying My Lord, how often [ποσάκις] may my brother fail [ἁμαρτάνω] me and be ignored [ἀφίημι]? Up to seven times?

Which is somewhat different from the usual "how many times shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him."

David Myatt
2013

Notes

[1] By *interpretation* here is meant (i) commentaries (academic, theological, and otherwise); (ii) explanations (critical, and otherwise); (iii) translations; and – most importantly – (iv) a seeking of the meaning of (a) both the text (in whole and in parts) and (b) of the words and terms used.

[2] One misused English word is 'terror', often used to translate الرُّعْبَ in Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran. See below: *Translation and Al-Quran*.

[3] Quare quod a summo bono diversum est sui natura, id summum bonum non est; quod nefas est de eo cogitare, quo nihil constat esse praestantius. *Consolatio Philosophiae,* Liber Tertius, pr. x

[4] Beowulf, 2470f, where the spelling synn is used:

> eaferum læfde, swa deð eadig mon,
> lond ond leodbyrig, þa he of life gewat.
> þa wæs synn ond sacu Sweona ond Geata
> ofer wid wæter, wroht gemæne,

herenið hearda, syððan Hreðel swealt

[5] The conventional interpretation of ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μηκέτι ἁμάρτανε is "from now on sin no more".

[6] <u>Luke 19.10</u>:

ἦλθεν γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ζητῆσαι καὶ σῶσαι τὸ ἀπολωλός

The arrivance [ἔρχομαι] of the Son of Man was to seek and to save what was lost

However, a more interesting interpretation is:

The arrivance of the Son of Man was to seek and to repair [σώζω] what had been damaged [ἀπόλλυμι]

and which interpretation is suggested by (i) the sense of σώζω: keep safe, preserve, maintain - whence repair, and (ii) the sense of ἀπόλλυμι: destroy, ruin, kill, demolish, and - metaphorically - damaged, lost, and die.

<u>Romans 13.10</u>:

 ἡ ἀγάπη τῷ πλησίον κακὸν οὐκ ἐργάζεται· πλήρωμα οὖν νόμου ἡ ἀγάπη

love brings no harm to the neighbour; love is the completion of the law

[7] ἁμαρτάνω classically implies a failure, mistake, an error, deprivation, loss, to miss/fail. qv (i) Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus:

ὅταν ταχύς τις οὑπιβουλεύων λάθρα
χωρῇ, ταχὺν δεῖ κἀμὲ βουλεύειν πάλιν:
εἰ δ᾽ ἡσυχάζων προσμενῶ, τὰ τοῦδε μὲν
πεπραγμέν᾽ ἔσται, τἀμὰ δ᾽ <u>ἡμαρτημένα</u>   621

But when there is a plot against me which is swiftly and furtively
Moving forward, then I must be swift in opposing that plot
Since if I remain at rest, then indeed
What is about to be done, will be - because of my mistake.

and (ii) Aeschylus, Agamemnon:

ὀφλὼν γὰρ ἁρπαγῆς τε καὶ κλοπῆς δίκην
τοῦ ῥυσίου θ᾽ <u>ἥμαρτε</u> καὶ πανώλεθρον 535
αὐτόχθονον πατρῷον ἔθρισεν δόμον.

The penalty for the pillage and theft was fair -
He lost his booty and completely ruined
His own land with his father's family cut down

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