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ROMANS 1:23

THE SCRIPTURE CONCERNED

> And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God INTO AN IMAGE MADE LIKE TO corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. (Romans 1:23 AV)

THE MEANING PEOPLE DRAW FROM THIS TRANSLATION

Paul's use of the Greek word "eikon" in this verse has been used by some people to assert that God does not have a form and shape.

THE MISTRANSLATION

In the Greek text of the New Testament there are TWO different words with somewhat similar meanings, but also with some differences between them. Romans 1:23 is the only place in the New Testament where these two words are used together, expressing a relationship to each other. These two words are "eikon" and "homoioma".

The Greek word translated as "changed" in this verse means "TO EXCHANGE one thing for another", and it is translated as "exchanged" in translations like the RSV, NRSV, NAS, NIV, etc.

The expression "into an image made like to" is a translation of the Greek expression "EN HOMOIOMATI EIKONOS". Let's look at these three words.

1) The Greek "en" means "in" or "into" and takes the dative case.

2) The Greek "homoiomati" is the dative case of "homoioma", here translated "made like to".

3) The Greek "eikonos" is the genitive case of "eikon", here translated "an image".

The correct literal translation of this Greek expression is "INTO THE LIKENESS OF AN IMAGE", and it is correctly rendered this way in Darby's Translation and in Young's Literal Translation.

In English we today don't make much of a distinction between the words "image" and "likeness". But in biblical Greek there is a noticeable distinction between "eikon" and "homoioma". It is the way these two words are used in the New Testament, which makes this distinction clear.

The Greek word EIKON: This refers to a true and accurate image, something that typically has a specific form and shape. The word is used to refer to Caesar (Matthew 22:20), to Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29), to God the Father (1 Corinthians 11:7; Colossians 1:15; etc.), and also to the yet-to-arise "Beast power" (Revelation 13:14; etc.).

The word "eikon" is repeatedly used in references to the true God, whereas the word "homoioma" is NEVER used in reference to God in the New Testament.

The Greek word HOMOIOMA: This word is used six times in the New Testament, and it is used TO EXPRESS ABSTRACT CONCEPTS, rather than things that have a literal shape. This word is never used to refer to any one specific person. Thus this word is used to express:

- THE CONCEPT of "the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7)

- THE CONCEPT of "the likeness of his death" (Romans 6:5)

- THE CONCEPT of "the similitude of Adam's transgression" (Romans 5:14)

- THE CONCEPT of "the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3)

- "The shapes (or likenesses) of the locusts like unto horses" (Revelation 9:7).

By comparing locusts to horses, this last Scripture is also dealing in abstract terms. It is THE CONCEPT of locusts being like horses that Revelation 9:7 presents to us, and not the actual shape of horses!

Of the six times the word "homoioma" is used in the New Testament, it is used five times by the Apostle Paul, and four of those five uses are in the Book of Romans. So when Paul means A LITERAL COMPARISON, then he used the word "eikon" (as in Romans 8:29, "the eikon of his Son"); and when Paul means A CONCEPTUAL COMPARISON, then he used the word "homoioma" (as in "the homoioma of death, of sinful flesh, of Adam's transgression", etc.).

Now let's look at Romans 1:23 again. Recall that the word "homoioma" precedes the word "eikon" in this verse. Paul is NOT making a literal comparison, but a conceptual comparison.

The subject of this verse is not God but "THE GLORY of God"; and glory is an abstract concept. And in this verse Paul is NOT speaking about sinful human beings exchanging "eikon's", but about them exchanging that glory of God for a "homoioma", for a concept of what (supposedly) constitutes "God".

In this verse Paul is saying that sinful man exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God with THE CONCEPT OF IMAGES, made to look like man, birds, animals, reptiles and insects.

THE SOURCE OF THIS WRONG TRANSLATION

This translation has also been influenced by Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation. Jerome translated the Greek expression "en homoiomati eikonos" into Latin as "in similitudinem imaginis". The Latin word "similitudo, similitudinis" means "similarity, resemblance". It is the root of our English word "similitude". The Latin word "imago, imaginis" means "appearance, image". It is the root of our English word "image".

In this translation into Latin the idea, that in the Greek text of the New Testament the word "homoioma" referred to abstract concepts, was lost. True, the old Latin word "similitudo" was sometimes used to refer to "parables", thus to comparisons that did not express a literal resemblance, but the translators focussed on the much more frequent meaning of a real resemblance.

So the point that Paul was making a conceptual comparison in Romans 1:23, rather than a literal comparison, was lost on the translators.

THE CORRECT TRANSLATION

> And EXCHANGED the glory of the incorruptible God FOR THE CONCEPT OF (THE LIKENESS OF) an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. (Romans 1:23)

THE MEANING OF THIS CORRECT TRANSLATION

The word "eikon" is not the focus of this verse. Paul's focus was on "homoioma", THE CONCEPT of pagan idols in general, the concept of idolatry. It is the concept of "the glory of God" which Paul states human beings HAVE exchanged for the concept of idolatry.

Paul's use of the word "eikon" in this verse does not warrant us making any deductions about the nature and the appearance of God. For information on that subject we have to examine other Scriptures, which make far more direct statements. At any rate, this Scripture does not in any way call God's appearance into question.

IN SUMMARY

This Scripture is discussed in more detail in the article "AN EXAMINATION OF ROMANS 1:23" in the main directory of this website. See also the articles on Genesis 1:26 and on Revelation 9:7.

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