

July 2019

Frank W. Nelte

THE MISTRANSLATION IN LEVITICUS 19:20

This verse contains a serious and very perverse mistranslation which creates a very twisted picture for an instruction God gave to Israel in Old Testament times. Here is the verse in question.

And whosoever lies carnally with a woman, that *is* a bondmaid, **betrothed** (Hebrew charaph) to an husband, and not at all redeemed, nor freedom given her; **she shall be scourged** (Hebrew biqqoret); they shall not be put to death, because she was not free. (Leviticus 19:20)

The situation was as follows:

A free Israelite man forces a slave girl to have sex with him, meaning that **he basically raped the slave woman**. The matter is then found out. Now our KJV translation implies **two things** here: first it implies that this slave girl is **engaged** to marry some man; secondly it states that this slave girl is to be **scourged**, but without in any way specifying the amount of scourging.

The description of this scenario contains two expressions that are of significance. They are "**not at all redeemed**" and "**nor freedom given her**". The Hebrew text for these two expressions makes the emphatic point that **this woman was helpless** in this situation! She was a weak, helpless slave who was confronted by a strong man intent on forcing her to have sex with him.

Question:

Why on earth would God possibly decree that a helpless slave should be "**scourged**" because some perverse man had raped her?

I mean, that is **a perverse judgment** if there ever was one! God would never punish a woman with scourging for having been raped against her will! The idea is perverse! It in fact sounds very much like the way **the pharisaic sages in the Talmud** reasoned.

Expressions like "... he is scourged twice", "... he is scourged once only", "... he should be scourged six times", "... he is scourged three times", etc. are easy to find in the Talmud. The Talmud very readily talks about people being scourged for the flimsiest of reasons. The Talmud in several places also freely talks about "the rape of a betrothed maiden", though without referring to this specific verse. But this concept is freely expressed in the Talmud.

The point is that the talmudic sages very freely and very quickly judged someone, including righteous angels, to be worthy of scourging. **That's the way Satan talks** ... freely handing out scourging here, there and everywhere.

So what is the truth for Leviticus 19:20?

The truth is that we are dealing with two gross mistranslations in this verse.

1) The Hebrew verb "**charaph**" here translated as 'betrothed' or 'engaged' doesn't mean betrothed at all! This Hebrew verb really means "**to reproach, to cast blame, to defy**, etc.". For the 41 times it is used in the Old Testament, it is only once mistranslated as "betrothed", and that is here in Leviticus

19:20. There really is no connection between "reproaching and casting blame" on the one hand, and "being engaged" on the other hand. This is a serious mistranslation. None of the translations I have looked at have translated "charaph" correctly in this verse.

2) The Hebrew noun "**biqqoret**" here translated into English as the verb "she shall be scourged" doesn't mean scourged at all! This noun is only used this one time in the entire Old Testament. But this noun is led back to the verb "baqar", and this verb means "**to enquire, to seek, to search**". Again, there is no connection between "enquiring, searching, seeking" and "scourging". This is another serious mistranslation. But this mistranslation has at least been addressed by a number of other translations.

Let's keep in mind that the pharisaic Hebrew scholars of the talmudic period are the ones who freely talked about scourging for typically very flimsy reasons.

Mistranslating the key Hebrew words in this verse as "betrothed" and as "she shall be scourged" goes back to the interpretations for this verse that were provided by talmudic and post-talmudic Hebrew scholars (e.g. Aben Ezra who wrote a commentary on the Old Testament, and Rashi (also called Jarchi) who also wrote extensive commentaries on major parts of the Talmud). The translation we have become an accepted interpretation for this verse, and that was then picked up by many English language translators.

Let's deal with each mistranslation individually.

"BETROTHED TO A HUSBAND"

We have already seen that the Hebrew word "charaph" means "to cast blame, to reproach, to defy". Here are a few verses where this Hebrew word is translated correctly.

And the Philistine said, **I defy** (Hebrew "charaph") the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together. (1 Samuel 17:10)

Does that sound like the Philistine giant Goliath wanted **to marry** the armies of Israel ... because he used the word "charaph"? Obviously not! In this verse the translators had no difficulty figuring out the obvious meaning for the verb "charaph".

In this context with David and Goliath the word "charaph" is also used in four more verses (i.e. verses 25, 26, 36 and 45), and in each case it is correctly translated as the verb "to defy". These places solidify this correct meaning of "charaph". The word has nothing at all to do with being married or engaged or betrothed.

Notice how King Hezekiah used the word "charaph".

LORD, bow down Your ear, and hear: open, LORD, Your eyes, and see: and hear the words of Sennacherib, which has sent him **to reproach** (Hebrew "charaph") the living God. (2 Kings 19:16)

Once again, the Assyrian king Sennacherib wasn't offering **to become "betrothed"** to the God of Israel, was he? No, he was very clearly insulting and reproaching Israel's God. Here the translators also had no difficulty figuring out the correct meaning of "charaph". "Charaph" is also used in verses 22 and 23, further cementing the correct meaning.

Let's look at how Job used this word.

My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart **shall not reproach me** (Hebrew "charaph")

so long as I live. (Job 27:6)

Job wasn't talking about getting engaged either, was he? No, once again the correct meaning of "charaph" is "to reproach".

I could present many more Scriptures to make the same point, but the above examples should suffice. It should be abundantly obvious that there is no connection at all between reproaching / defying and becoming engaged to be married. "Betrothed" is **a perverse and absurd mistranslation** for the Hebrew verb "charaph"!

So how did we get this perverse mistranslation? That's simple. The Jewish sages had decided in advance what this verse supposedly means, and then they fitted the appropriate details into their misinterpretations. They decided that this is talking about a woman who has been "designated for a man", i.e. she is (supposedly) engaged to some man.

Next, the Hebrew word rendered as "a husband" in this expression is the word "**ish**". This is the basic Hebrew word for "a man", whether he is married or whether he is single. The word does not imply marriage at all. To uphold the predetermined meaning for this verse, it was simply required to translate "ish" as "husband" rather than simply as "man". But here "man" is correct, and "husband" is wrong.

So the correct meaning for the expression incorrectly translated as "betrothed to a husband" is **"reproached by a man"**. When the man raped this slave woman, then the woman had very obviously been defiled, abused and reproached by her rapist. It is not "betrothed **to** a husband", but "reproached **by** a man". It is not "to"; it is "by" that applies in this specific context.

So let's forever expunge the misleading expression "betrothed to a husband"! And let's replace it with the correct translation "reproached and abused by a man".

Now let's deal with the second mistranslation.

"SHE SHALL BE SCOURGED"

This is more straightforward to sort out, because a number of translations expose this error.

As already mentioned, the Hebrew noun "biqqoret" is led back to a verb that means "to enquire, to seek, to search". But it has nothing at all to do with "scourging". In recognition of this fact, here are a number of different translations for this verse:

- JPS = ... there shall be inquisition
- ESV (English Standard Version) = ... a distinction shall be made
- RSV = ... an inquiry shall be held
- NRSV = ... an inquiry shall be held
- YLT = ... an investigation there is
- LEB (Lexham English Bible) = ... there shall be an obligation to compensate

However, the majority of the translators stayed with the idea that the woman is somehow also guilty and needs to be punished.

NOT AT ALL REDEEMED

Notice the statement that this slave woman is "not at all redeemed". What does this mean? It is easy to assume that this refers to her status as a slave. But that is not what this refers to. Her status as a slave is already expressed by the word "bondmaid". So this is not a statement about her status. **It is a statement about what has happened to her.**

The Hebrew verb translated as "redeemed" is "padah". It certainly means "redeemed", but with a focus on being "**delivered, saved, rescued**". That's also what the word "redeemed" refers to. This Hebrew word assuredly also has a physical literal application. And in this verse, after telling us that this slave woman has been raped, the expression "not at all redeemed" really means "**not at all saved or rescued or delivered**" from her rapist. She is a victim! And this expression "not at all rescued or saved" from her rapist proves her status as a victim.

The next expression further reinforces her victim status.

The expression "**nor her freedom given her**" implies that she was treated wrongfully. In other words, this mistreatment (having been raped) could have been judged to warrant giving the woman her freedom as compensation for having been raped. The expression "nor her freedom given her" refers to a **consequence to having been raped**; it does not refer to her status before the rape took place.

Let's understand that the two expressions "not at all redeemed" and "nor freedom given her", both mentioned **after** it is stated that she has been "reproached by a man", **both apply to after the rape**, and not to before the rape! They both apply to consequences of the rape. The woman really **should have been rescued** from her rapist; and after the rape she **should have been given** her freedom (with the rapist responsible for any financial loss incurred by the owner of the slave woman).

But the translators couldn't understand all this. And so they couldn't see the obvious contradiction in their own positions. That contradiction is as follows:

- 1) **A man** forces a slave woman to have sex with him, raping her.
- 2) Her helpless status is clear: she doesn't have her freedom.
- 3) Furthermore, nobody helped her when the rapist attacked her.
- 4) The woman had in effect been "reproached" when she was raped.
- 5) **An enquiry** is to be made into the matter to establish all the facts.
- 6) **If** in this situation the woman had been a free woman, then the man would have received **the death penalty**. But the death penalty was not to be applied because the woman was only a slave.
- 7) After the enquiry has been made, **the man** is the one who is pronounced guilty, and that is shown by **the man having to bring a trespass offering**. A trespass offering was an acknowledgment of guilt. That's verse 21.
- 8) The man brings the trespass offering because **he is the guilty one**.
- 9) The priest makes an atonement for the man (verse 22), because he is the guilty one. **No atonement needs to be made for the woman**, because at no stage was any guilt implied for her; she was only the victim.

Without the perverse mistranslation "she shall be scourged" there is in fact in these verses **not the slightest hint that the woman has any kind of guilt** at all in this situation. She wasn't out there trying to seduce him into having sex with her; no, he just raped her!

The contradiction is that the translators want **the woman** to be scourged, when it is **the man** who is guilty, and who has to acknowledge guilt for the matter by bringing a trespass offering. They scourge the woman, but all the man has to do is give one of his animals. So in this mistranslated scenario the man actually gets off far lighter than the woman ... giving a ram would not have been any big deal compared to receiving a scourging, one that would very likely be public.

Here is a corrected translation for Leviticus 19:20, retaining the other parts of the KJV translation:

And whosoever lies carnally with a woman that is a bondmaid (i.e. a slave), and **who has been reproached by this man**, and she is not at all **helped**, nor is her freedom given her, **an enquiry shall be made; he** shall not be put to death because **she** was not free. (Leviticus 19:20 corrected)

So here is the point about this specific instruction:

- 1) **It is all about the man.** If he, the man, rapes a slave woman, then here is what you do with the man.
- 2) There is nothing in this instruction that applies to the woman. **At no stage is the woman the subject of this verse.** She is only the victim, nothing more. This verse is not about what was to happen to the victimized woman.
- 3) The premise at the start of this verse is that a man has raped a slave woman. **The conclusion**, after due investigation, is that **he** shall not die because **she** was not free.
- 4) If she had been a free woman, **then he would have had to die!** Why? For raping her!
- 5) Instead of having to die for raping this woman, he only has to bring **a trespass offering**, which was a public acknowledgment of guilt (verse 21).
- 6) The perverse mistranslation of this verse twisted this correct focus to one of assigning joint responsibility to the victim, the raped woman.
- 7) So let's understand that ... **"he shall not be put to death because she was not free"**.

You are unlikely to ever see a correct translation for this verse in any translation of the Bible. But hopefully you now understand this verse correctly. It is mistranslations like this one that create the totally perverse perception of a harsh and mean Old Testament God, who would have a woman scourged because some man raped her.

Frank W Nelte