

‘YOU BELIEVE IN GOD’ AND ‘BELIEVE IN GOD’: A CRITICAL STUDY OF JOHN 14:1

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Abstract:

A study of the grammar of the Greek text of John 14:1 shows that *pisteuete* appears twice in the verse – on in relation to God and the other in relation to Jesus. *Pisteuete* has a double meaning; it is an active indicative verb and at the same time an imperative. Both meanings are found in different translations of the text. This study argues that the first *pisteuete* should be translated as an active indicative verb – “you believe” not as an imperative, “believe”. This is because “you believe” agrees with the context, the situation the disciples were in – troubled. Thus *pisteuete eis ton theon kai eis eme pisteuete* should be translated, “you believe in God; believe also in me [Jesus]”. This translation is significant because it agrees with the background of the disciples; as Jews they already believe in God before they came to follow Jesus. There is no need to command them to believe in God again in times of trouble. If anything at all they should continue believing in God. Translating the text that way into the Ghanaian languages is of value because, to the Ghanaian/African, belief in God is debatable. Ghanaians believed in God before the Good News about Jesus was brought to them, and they continue to believe in God. As such, any translation of the Bible that has to do with belief in God, should take that into consideration.

Key Words: African biblical studies, mother-tongue translations, Bible translation philosophies

Introduction:

A cursory reading of the Gospel of John reveals that it contains a lot of drama which captures the tension between those who accept Jesus as “of God”, and those who reject his words and works outright. In the Gospel of John, unlike the synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ actions centre around seven miracles he performed: Turning water into wine (2:1-11); Healing an official’s son (4:46-54); Healing a lame man (5:1-16); Feeding of five thousand people (6:5-14); Walking on water (6:17-21); Healing a man born blind (9:1-7); Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45); Giving the disciples a second miraculous catch of fish (21:1-14). These miracles which are called signs in the Gospel of John are meant to challenge witnesses to the ministry of Jesus to accept or reject his words and works. From the very onset of the Gospel one is called to believe (1:7) and John ends his Gospel stating that his purpose in writing is that his readers would believe (20:31). Jesus captions accepting his words and works as “believe”. Believe in the Greek New Testament is *pisteuō*, meaning “to trust”, “to place confidence in”, “to rely upon” (Vine, 1996:61). It is a verb that appears 241 times in the entire New Testament, of which 98 are in the Gospel of John. The word appears as a noun, *pistis* “belief” - the feeling that something is definitely true or exists - 243 times in the New Testament but not in the Gospel of John. In its noun form *pistis* is translated as “faith”, “trust”. It appears as an adjective – *pistos*, translated as “faithful”, “trusting” - 67 times in the New Testament.

This paper is a study of “believe” in John 14:1. A reading of ten English translations of the text reveals that *pisteuete*, translated “believe” appears twice in the verse. Some English translations render it as “You believe”; others “Believe”. Why the variations? How should *pisteuete* be understood in the context of John 14:1? How is John 14:1 rendered in the Dangme translations of the Bible? How do the Dangme translations of the verse compare with other Ghanaian mother-tongue translations?

Methodology

The study used one of the three broad methods of biblical studies, the exegetical method - a careful systematic study of Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning (Tate, 2008). Fee (1993:32) outlines eight basic rules for New Testament exegesis: Survey the historical context in general; confirm the limits of the passage; become thoroughly acquainted with your paragraph or periscope; analyse sentence structures and syntactical relationships; establish the text; analyse significant words; research the historical-cultural background (see also Porter, 1997 and Stuart, 2010).

The Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament (1994) and ten (10) English translations were studied to find out similarities and difference in the translations of the John 14:1. The text was also studied in the Dangme translations. These translations were studied because the mother-tongue of the writer is Dangme - the indigenous language of the people of Ada, Ningo, Kpone, Prampram, Shai, Osudoku, Yilo Krobo, Manya Krobo, and some people in Agotime, east of Ho in the Volta Region of Ghana and part of Togo. Mother-tongue is used in this paper to mean the medium of one's innermost feelings and thought (Amonoo, 1989). It is that native language into which one is born and in which one grows up (Quarshie, 2002). A mother-tongue is a repository of indigenous wisdom, knowledge, insight, science, theology and philosophy. It is in the mother-tongue that one thinks and dreams, before translating one's thoughts to other languages (Bediako, 2006). Ekem (2007:48) says "The varied mother-tongues of Africa have a lot to offer by way of biblical interpretation in Ghanaian/African languages as viable material for interpretation, study Bibles and commentaries". Ekem's point is that, the mother-tongue Bibles have issues which need interpretations and as such an African biblical exegete must of a necessity dialogue with the mother-tongue bibles for they reflect a dynamic encounter between Christian and traditional African world-views, both of which continue to exert a powerful impact on communities. The Dangme renderings were compared with fifteen (15) other Ghanaian mother-tongue translations in five (5) languages to see whether there are variations in meaning.

The text

Mh. tarasse, sqw u`mw/n h` kardi, a\ pisteu, ete eivj to.n qeo.n kai. eivj evme. pisteu, ete (John 14:1, Nestle-Aland, 1994).

[M... tarassesthō hymōn he kardia pisteuete eis ton theon kai eis eme pisteuete.]

Some English translations of the text

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me" (KJV, 1611/1769).

"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me" (RSV, 1952).

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me" (NAB, 1970).

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (NIV, 1982).

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God, trust also in me" (NJB, 1986).

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me" (NRSV, 1989).

"Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me" (NASB, 1995).

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me" (ESV, 2001).

"Don't be troubled. You trust God, now trust in me" (NLT, 2004).

"Do not be worried and upset. Believe in God and believe also in me" (GNB, 2007).

Findings And Discussion

The pericope of John 14:1 is John 13:18 to 14:14. Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him (13:21). This set them thinking as to who would do that. Then Jesus said that in a little while they would see him longer (13:33). In response Peter asked Jesus, "Where are you going?" (13:36). Jesus' response to Peter's question is what we find in John 14:1. Thus, the first part of the text was directly to Peter; but in the second part Jesus addressed all the disciples.

Exegesis of John 14:1

The discourse of John 14 primarily deals with the question: "Where is Jesus going, and what consequences does this have for the disciples?" (Martin & Scott, 2003:1161). The grammar of verse 1

has some difficulties that affect its translation and interpretation. In the Greek the pronoun *hymōn* “your” is plural but the *kardia* “heart” is singular. The critical question here is whether Jesus is addressing all the disciples who were troubled because of what he told them earlier that he was going away (7:34; 8:21; 12:8, 35; 13:33) that he would die (12:32-33); and that one of the Twelve was a traitor (13:21); that Peter would disown him three times (13:38); that Satan was at work against all of them (Luke 22:31-32); and that all the disciples would fall away (Matt. 26:31); or was he addressing Peter who would deny him? (13:38). Blum (2000:322) says “The cumulative weight of these revelations must have greatly depressed them”. Barton et al (1993:286) also are of the view that “All the disciples must have been troubled about Jesus’ predictions of denial, and departure. After all, if Peter’s commitment was shaky, then every disciple should be aware of his own weaknesses”. Tenney (1981:143) says in John 14:1 Jesus “began to address the entire company of disciples, as the plural *hymōn* “your” indicates” (cf. Keener, 1993:298). In that sense, even though the *kardia* “heart” is singular, one can conclude that Jesus was addressing all the disciples. It is difficult however, to reconcile the plural pronoun *hymōn* “your” and the singular noun *kardia* “heart” since in grammar, a pronoun must agree with a noun in number.

Jesus addressed the troubled heart/hearts by urging them to *pisteuete* “believe” (v.1). In the second part of the verse *pisteuete* is mentioned twice – one in reference to God and the other to Jesus. As far as the form of *pisteuete* is concerned, it may be either indicative or imperative in either or both sentences. By the use of the double imperative as some of the translations have done, “Jesus suggested that the proper approach to the question of human destiny is faith in a personal God” (Tenney, 1982:212).

But if we use the form of the verb alone to make our interpretation of the text we might not get it right. Thus, I want to look at both the form of the verb *pisteuete* and the context of the text to do my translation. I want to make a case that the first *pisteuete* is an indicative. *Pisteuete* is a verb in the present indicative tense, and in the active voice; in terms of number it is plural. As an indicative verb, it does not just tell us about the action but also the performer of the action. The *ete* at the end of *pisteuete* means “you (plural)”. Thus, *pisteuete* means, “you (plural) believe” or “you (plural) are believing”, if we want to translate it as a present continuous action. In that sense, *pisteuete eis ton theon* means “you (plural) believe in God” or “you (plural) are believing in God”. This is a statement of fact affirming the faith of the disciples. Here, Jesus was not commanding them to believe in God; he was affirming the belief they already had as Jews, in the Almighty God. “All Jews trusted in God; the disciples, being Jews, trusted in God too” (Hale, 2006:269). This interpretation is in line with the translation of *pisteuete* in the King James Version “ye believe in God”; the New Jerusalem Bible “You trust in God”; the New Living Translation “You have faith in God”; and the New American Bible “You have faith in God” as against the translations that render *pisteuete* as an imperative, “Believe in God” (see NIV, ESV, GNB, NASB, RSV, NRSV). The translations using “Believe in God” have converted a present active indicative verb into a command, and have put it into the mouth of Jesus because of the worried situation the disciples found themselves in. These translations have a point though. The first *pisteuete* can also be taken as an imperative because of its form. In the present tense, the second person plural indicative and imperative look alike (Hadjiantoniou, 1998: 212). But if we take the form alone without the context, we can miss the interpretation.

The second *pisteuete* in the text is clearly an imperative. Here, Jesus was commanding the disciples to put the same trust they have in God in him also. Perhaps, it is this second meaning that has been transferred to translate the first *pisteuete*. But the fact still remains that according to the context, the first *pisteuete* is a present, active indicative verb, second person plural, meaning, “You believe”. Thus, I will go with the translation, “You believe in God, believe also in me.” Some commentators however, go with “Believe in God; believe also in me” (see Carson et al, 1994: 1055), but it does not agree with the context.

What has happened to the Greek text?

A lot of things happen to a Greek text when it is being translated into another language. There is decoding and encoding (see Van der Watt, 2002:246-265). This does not mean the translations are not genuine. Thus those who go with “Believe in God, believe also in me” are not wrong. Translation in general, which is the process of changing an original written text (source) in an original verbal

language (the source language) into a written text (the target text) in a different verbal language (the target language) (Munday, 2005:5); and Bible translation in particular which is the expression of ancient texts in Hebrew and Greek (source language) in a modern language (receptor language), is a complex process (Nida, 1991:5). It evolves a new text as a result of decoding the source text on several levels and encoding it into the target language by means of the linguistic, literally, and cultural conventions of the target language (Nida 1991:10). Since translation involves decoding - the operation by which a receptor interprets a discourse and understands its message (Nida and Tiber 1982: 199) – and encoding - the operation by which a sender plans and composes a discourse to convey it (Nida and Tiber 1982: 200), one can say that every translation is an interpretation. Nida (1991) describes the actual process of translating as a technology which employs the insights and principles of a number of behavioral sciences in order to accomplish its goal of effective interlingual communication.

Philosophies of Bible translation

In each of the English versions cited above, the translators used one or two of the three philosophies of Bible translation: Formal equivalence or word-for-word translation approach (Van der Watt 2002:247). This approach attempts to reproduce the Greek and Hebrew as exactly as possible into English. Words, figures of speech, and sometimes even the sentence structure of the original languages are reproduced. This an impossible task since translation is not a matter of finding word equivalents in another language, because languages seldom correspond at the same level (Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 2012:23).

The Dynamic equivalence or thought-for-thought translation approach (Nida, 1964, 1969; Nida and Taber, 1982), is a principle based on the assumption that any message can be communicated to any audience in any language provided that the most effective form of expression is found. Thus Greek and Hebrew figures of speech are replaced with modern rough equivalents. They are more readable in a sense, though sometimes in a freer translation some passages become more interpretations than translation.

The third approach is the Paraphrase which is not really a translation, but rewording of the Scriptures so that they speak in a very earthly, common tongue. Kenneth Taylor who first used this approach in 1971 to produce the Living Bible, operated on the assumption that the New Testament was written in Koin... Greek - the common language of the people - and not that of playwrights or philosophers. Therefore, the Bible should be translated into everyday language so that many people can read and understand its message. Paraphrases even though express Scripture in everyday language, are not the most exact rendering of Scripture (www.tateville.com/translations.html, accessed 5/12/12).

Dangme translations of the text

Somi He ô (The Dangme New Testament, BSG/UBS, 1977)

Nyâ ko ye nyâ tsui; nyâ he Mawu nô nyââ ye, nâ imi hu nyâ he ye nô nyââ ye. [Do not trouble your hearts; you should believe in God, and believe in me also].

Ngmami Klôuklôu ô (The Dangme Full Bible, BSG/UBS, 1999)

Nyâ ko ye nyâ tsui. Nyââ lââ nyâ he Mawu nyââ ye; nâ imi hu nyâ he mi nyââ ye. [Do not trouble your hearts. As for you believe in God; and believe in me also].

Wami Munyuô: Somi He ô Kâ La amâ (The Living New Testament and Psalms, IBS, 1997)

Nyâ ko ye tsui, nyâ heô Mawu nô yeô, nyâ he ami hu ye nô nyââ ye. [Do not let your heart be troubled, you are believing in God, believe in me also].

Analysis of the Dangme translations

M... tarassesthō hymōn he kardia

The Somi He ô (The Dangme New Testament, BSG//UBS, 1977) and the Ngmami Klôuklôu ô (The Dangme Full Bible, BSG/UBS, 1999), translate m... tarassesthō hymōn he kardia as nyâ ko ye nyâ tsui [Do not trouble your hearts], meaning it was the disciples who were troubling their own hearts. But it is possible for one to trouble oneself without any cause? Even though tarassesthō, “be troubled” is in the passive voice, exegetically it does not agree with the context of the text. As indicated above, certain circumstance made the hearts of the disciples troubled; they did not impose the trouble on themselves (see John 7:34; 8:21; 12:8,

35; 13:33 – Jesus told the disciples he was going away; 12:32-33 – he would die; 13:21 – one of them would betray him; 13:38 – Peter would disown him three times; cf. Luke 22:31-32 – Satan was at work against all of them; Matt. 26:31 – all the disciples would fall away).

The Wami Munyuô: *Somi He ô Kâ La amâ* (The Living New Testament and Psalms, IBS, 1997), render m... tarassesthō hymōn he kardia as nyâ ko ye tsui. This is in the active voice unlike in the Greek text where it is in the passive voice. This means that the disciples were troubled as a result of something. This agrees with the context.

Pisteuete eis ton theon

While the *Somi He ô* (The Dangme New Testament, BSG/UBS, 1977) and the *Ngmami Klôuklôu ô* (The Dangme Full Bible, BSG/UBS, 1999), translate *pisteuete eis ton theon* as, *nyâ he Mawu nô nyâa ye* [Believe in God], the *Wami Munyuô: Somi He ô Kâ La amâ* (The Living New Testament and Psalms, IBS, 1997) render it as *nyâ heô Mawu nô yeô* [You continue to believe in God]. *Nyâ he Mawu nô nyâa ye* is an imperative, command for them to believe in God. *Nyâ heô Mawu nô yeô* is a statement in the indicative, an affirmation of the belief the disciples already have in God. Both translations are legitimate though, but *nyâ he Mawu nô nyâa ye* [Believe in God] raises the question as to whether belief in God is debatable among the Dangme.

In response to this question T. O. Caesar, a Dangme Lecturer at Ada College of Education says:

Dangme li ngâ hemi kâ yemi ngâ Mawu Ope ô mi. A tsôô Mawu he so ngâ abâhi a mi, ngâ lahi a mi, ngâ munyu tumihi a mi, ngâ telimihi a mi, ngâ nyaziahi a mi kâ ni kpahi fuu a mi. Mawu pi nubwô ha Dangme li. A ngôô bu kâ haa Mawu nâ a tsâ we e biâ basabasa. Ke nô ko ba nâ nô ko wo Mawu ta pâ, o na nâ o le kaa le sane ô, pi sane nyafi kulaa (Caesar, n.d:5) .

[The Dangme believe in God Almighty. Their belief in God is seen in proverbs, songs, sayings, pouring of libation, stories, and in many other things. Believe in God is not debatable among the Dangme. They give respect to God and so do not mention His name anyhow. When something happens and someone and a Dangme mentions the name of God, then it means the matter is not an ordinary one].

Kai eis eme pisteuete

The *kai* “also” in this section of the verse is an adverb modifying the verb *pisteuete*, which is an imperative. Jesus had affirmed their belief in God as Jews. But here Jesus added, *kai eis eme pisteuete* “believe in me also”. The *kai* “also” shows a relationship between the two *pisteuete* “believes”. Jesus used *kai* “also” to show that believe or believing involves relationship. In that sense, another way of translating *pisteuete*, into English is to use ‘trusting’ or ‘entrusting oneself’ to God and Jesus.

Entrusting oneself to God and Jesus in Dangme is *he to mi kâ wo Mawu kâ Yesu a de mi*. This is the real meaning of believe which is rendered in the Dangme translations of the Bible as, *he mi kâ ye mi*, literally meaning “taking and eating”. People who believe in deities among the Dangme literally “take the deities and eat them”, through the rituals performed by the priests/priestesses of such deities to keep them connected. In order words, believers in deities entrust themselves to such deities for protection, prosperity, sustenance, among other things. Interpreting believe as “trust” or “entrust” to in the John 14:1 in the Dangme will thus be: *Nyâ ko ye tsui; nyâ to ô nyâ he ngô wo ô Mawu dâ mi; nyâ to nyâ he ngô wo ami hu ye dâ mi*. [Do not let your hearts be troubled; you are entrusting yourselves to God; entrust yourselves to me also].

John 14:1 in some other Ghanaian mother-tongue translations of the Bible

1. Ga

Ñmale Kroñkroñ Le (The Full Bible in Ga, BSG/UBS, 1907)

Nyekayea nyetsuii; nyehea Nyonmo no nyeyea, ni mi hu nyehea mino nyeyea. [Do not trouble your hearts; believe in God, and believe in me also].

Åmalâ Krôåkrôå Lâ (The Full Bible in Ga, BSG, 2006)

Nyâkayea nyâtsui; nyâhea Nyôâmô nô nyâyea, ni mi nu nyâhea minô nyâyea. [Do not trouble your hearts; believe in God; and believe also in me].

2. Ewe

Biblia (The Full Bible in Ewe, BSG/UBS, 1930)

Migana miañe dzi naûuû nyanyanya o; mixô Mawu dzi se, eye mixô nye hã dzinye se. [Do not let your hearts be shaken; you believe in God, believe also in me].

Nublaba Nublaba Yeye La (The New Testament in Ewe, BSG, 1990)

Migana miañe dzi naûuû nyanyanya o; mixô Mawu dzi se, eye mixô nye hã dzinye se. [Do not let your hearts be shaken; you believe in God, believe also in me].

Agbenya La (The Living Word, Full Bible in Ewe, IBS, 2006)

Migana vovÿ nađo mi eye miañe dzi naûuû nyanyanya o. Mixô Mawu dzi se, eye mixô nye hã dzinye se. [Do not let fear trouble you so that your hearts be shaken. You believe in God, believe in me also].

Biblia (The Full Bible in Ewe, BSG, 2010)

Migana dzika natso mia fo o. Mixô Mawu dzi se eye mixô nye hã dzinye se. [Do not let the veins of your heart be torn. You believe in God and believe also in me].

3. Fante

Nwoma Krônkrôn (The Full Bible in Fante, BSG/UBS, 1948)

Mma hom akoma nntutu; hom ngye Nyankopôn ndzi, hom ngye mo so ndzi. [Let not your hearts be uprooted; believe in God, believe also in me].

Ahyâmu Fofor No Mu Nwoma (The New Testament in Fante, UBS, 1982).

Mma hom akoma nntu; hom ngye Nyankopôn ndzi, hom ngye mo so ndzi. [Let not your hearts be uprooted; believe in God, believe also in me].

4. Asante-Twi

Twerâ Kronkron (The Full Bible in Asante-Twi, BSG/UBS, 1964)

Mommma mo akoma nntutu! Mo nnye Onyankopôn nni, na me nso, monnye me nni. [Do not let your hearts be troubled! Believe in God, and believe in me also].

Nkwa Asâm Apam Fororô (The Living Word New Testament and Psalms in Asante-Twi, IBS, 1996)

Mommma mo akoma nntu. Monnye Onyankopôn nni na monnye me nso nni. [Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe also in me].

Twerâ Kronkron (The Full Bible in Asante-Twi, BSG, 2012)

Mommma mo akoma nntutu! Monnye Onyankopôn nni, na me nso, monnye me nni. [Do not let your hearts be troubled! Believe in God, and believe also in me].

5. Akuapem-Twi

Kyerâw Kronkron (The Akuapem-Twi Full Bible, BSG/UBS, 1964)

Mommma mo koma nntutu! Munnye Onyankopôn nni, na me nso, munnye me nni. [Do not let your hearts be troubled! Believe in God, and believe also in me].

Apam Foforo (The New Testament in Akuapem-Twi, BSG, 1976)

Mommma mo koma nntutu! Munnye Onyankopôn nni, na me nso, munnye me nni. [Do not let your hearts be troubled! Believe in God, and believe also in me].

Nkwa Asâm Apam Foforo Ne Nwôm (The Living Word New Testament in Akuapem—Twi, IBS, 2000)

Mommma mo akoma nntutu! Munnye Onyankopôn nni, na me nso, munnye me nni. [Do not let your hearts be troubled! Believe in God, and believe also in me].

Kyerâw Kronkron (The Full Bible in Akuapem-Twi, BSG, 2012)

Mommma mo akoma nntutu! Munnye Onyankopôn nni, na me nso, munnye me nni. [Do not let your hearts be troubled! Believe in God, and believe also in me].

Like the Dangme translations (1977 and 1999), the Ga, Fante, Asante-Twi and Akuapem-Twi translations of John 14:1 have rendered *pisteuete eis ton theon* ‘You believe in God’ as imperative: *nyâhea Nyôâmô nô nyâyea; hom ngye Nyankopôn ndzi; mo nnye Onyankopôn nni; munnye Onyankopôn nni*, thus throwing the background of the mother-tongue bible readers away. The translation as they stand now mean that the Ga, Fante, Asante and Akuapem-Twi speakers, lived in a *tabula rasa* state – a position of the absence of preconceived ideas about God – before Christianity was introduced to them. The Ewe translations on the other hand render *pisteuete eis ton theon* “You believe in God” as a statement affirming the belief of the disciples and the Ewe bible reading communities in God.

Conclusion

The grammar of the first *pisteuete* in John 14:1 indicates that it has a double meaning; it is both a present active indicative verb and an imperative. Translators of the text into both English and the Ghanaian mother-tongues have translated *pisteuete* either as an imperative or indicative. I have argued that translating the first *pisteuete* as an imperative without looking at the context of the text will not bring out its meaning clearly, especially to Ghanaian mother-tongue Bible readers, to whom belief in God is their experience before receiving the message of Christianity. Thus, John 14:1 should be translated as, “You believe in God; believe also in me [Jesus]”. Such a translation has great value in that it has an implication for evangelism and discipleship.

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