

Translation Traditions

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If you read your Greek New Testament long enough, you'll eventually end up running into perplexing conflicts between the Greek and your mother-tongue translation. In any language, there are often any number of idiosyncratic renderings that seem to get passed down from one translation to another without obvious regard for the text of the original language. It was Dr. Robert Bascom (UBS) who actually called my attention to what he quipped were "translation traditions". For our purposes, let's define a *translation tradition* as any rendering of any particular text which appears in different translations spanning multiple generations (and sometimes languages) for which there is no variant that can account for the translation.¹ The purpose of this article is both to call attention to the phenomenon as well as to pose a plausible hypothesis for why this might occur.

It should be noted at the outset that what we call translation traditions are not necessarily translation errors, but typical ways in which a text is rendered, which over time does not vary or varies little. These traditions can (and sometimes do) involve error, but this should not be assumed the case in every instance. However, for our purposes, I have selected what I believe to be a translation tradition which does in fact involve an error in the translation of the Greek into English. The fact that this error is consistently perpetuated in one after another translation, indicates that the decision to translate the text in a certain manner is not based on any grammatical, syntactical, semantic or discourse features of the original language, but rather, and probably involuntarily, on a tradition of translation that spans centuries, and in the case of our example, even multiple languages.

Test case #1: Ephesians 4:11

The following chart shows the most common translations of the text under consideration:

KJV	NKJV	RSV	NASB	CEV	NET	Tyndale	Geneva
And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers	And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers	And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,	And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors	Christ chose some of us to be apostles, prophets, missionaries, pastors, and teachers,	It was he who gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,	And the very same made some Apostles some prophetes some Evangelistes some Sheperdes some Teachers:	He therefore gave some to be Apostles, and some Prophets, and some Evangelist, and some Pastors, and Teachers,

¹ This is a working definition which gladly welcomes criticism and improvement.

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As can be seen from the foregoing comparison, the majority of translations render the Greek, Καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν, as some form of “he gave/made some as/to be”. In Spanish (RVR60), this phrase is rendered as “y él mismo constityó” (He himself constituted...). Even as far back as the first translation into Spanish, la *Biblia del Oso*, translated by Casiodoro de Reina in 1569, reads: “**Y él dio unos**, apóstoles; y otros, profetas; y otros, evangelistas; y otros, pastores y maestros” (*And he gave some*). This tradition of rendering δίδωμι as “to give some to be” or “to constitute” is a very old one, stretching back in English and Spanish to the time of the Reformation. This same tradition is followed by other translations/revisions such as: KJ21, ASV, AMP, BRG, CSB, CEB, DARBY, DLNT, DRA, NCV, YLT, NABRE, among so many others. This translation clearly represents a tradition which spans generations as well as translations, both Protestant and Catholic, dynamic and formal, as well as different languages (such as Spanish, Italian, and French).

The issue here whether δίδωμι + accusative case can be translated as “to give some to be”. To begin with the gloss “some” is supplied in the English (and other languages), while it is not found in the original, and no textual variants exist for this verse which might indicate an alternative reading. Furthermore, it would be the only such instance of this use in the whole New Testament. Δίδωμι can have a wider semantic range than just “to give”. For example, it can mean *to allow* or *to permit* (Acts 2:27; 13:35) or *to offer* (Luke 2:24; Galatians 1:4; Titus 2:14). It may also mean “to put”, as in, “to put in your hearts” in 2 Corinthians 8:16 (δίδωμι + accusative + ἐν: while “put” seems to be the most adequate translation, the clear understanding is that their concern is a God-given one).² Finally, in Revelation 20:13, δίδωμι has the meaning of “giving up” what one contains, as in the death and Hades “giving up” their dead, or “handing over”. All in all, the vast majority of contexts support the simple gloss “to give”, with few texts offering more nuanced meanings. In other words, the semantic range seems to be limited to the aforementioned examples.³

This notwithstanding, isn’t it possible that in Ephesians 4:11, δίδωμι could possible mean “to constitute” or “to give some as” or “to make”? After all, the context is quite different from the others. In Ephesians 4:11 God δίδωμι’s apostles, prophets, evangelists and teacher-pastors. These are people or offices that are being δίδωμι-ied. Still, even taking this into consideration, there are at least two reasons to reject the traditional translation in favor of another. First, as demonstrated earlier, this would be the only such usage in all of the New Testament. Given its uniqueness, this would seem to require a much higher burden of proof than tradition itself is able to provide. In addition to this, we have the same usage in John 17:6, where the Father clearly gives the *disciples* to Jesus. They are not constituted or made disciples by the Father, but

² See also Rev. 17:17 for a similar meaning with δίδωμι + εἰς + accusative.

³ By my count, there are 28 instances of δίδωμι + accusative case in the New Testament. Mat. 7:6, 20:28, 21:23, 24:29; Mr. 10:45, 11:28, 12:9, 13:24; Lk. 4:6, 19:15, 20:16; Jn. 3:34, 6:52, 17:6; Acts 2:27, 12:23, 13:35, 15:8, 20:32; 2 Cor. 1:22, 8:16; Eph. 4:11; 1 Thes. 4:8; Rev. 11:18, 13:4, 17:17, 19:7, 20:13.

rather given by him to Jesus (τοῖς ἀνθρώποις οὐκ ἔδωκάς μοι). So, it is clear that people can be *given* by the Father to Jesus.

Secondly, the context of Ephesians 4 also seems to mitigate against the traditional translation.

In Ephesians 4:8, Paul says that God gave gifts to men (**ἔδωκεν δόματα** τοῖς ἀνθρώποις). Verses nine and ten seem to be a parenthetical insertion, a fact which the ESV recognizes by putting these verses in parentheses. If that is the case, then verses 8 and 11 are naturally connected and the *gifts* given in verse eight are identified in verse eleven, namely, *apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers*. These gifts are given by God (αὐτός is in an emphatic position) to *the Church* for her edification.

For the aforementioned reasons, I would propose that the traditional translation does not do justice to meaning of the Greek. In other words, the translation should read: *And He himself gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers*. The NIV, ESV and NLT translate it in this way, breaking from the traditional translation. It is possible that the NLT says it best: “Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.” I will leave the implications of the proposed translation over against the traditional translation for the theologians. As it stands, the proposed translation has many virtues to commend it over against the traditional.

If we are right in rejecting the TT for our proposed translation (supported by versions such as the ESV, NIV and NLT in English), then one last question remains. From whence the traditional translation? As early as Tyndale, we find the TT in use in English. Tyndale used Erasmus’s Greek edition for his translation into English, and nevertheless, he still used the TT, even though the Greek doesn’t support it. Could this possibly be due to how Tyndale understood the Greek? At least one piece of external evidence suggests that this is not the case. In Spain, at around the same time, Casiodoro de Reina is translating the Bible into Spanish, and in Ephesians 4:11, he uses a construction with very similar import to that of Tyndale’s. This evidence from another language points us away from the Greek text and suggests a different common source for the TT in both English and Spanish.

I suggest that the common source which underlies the TT for Ephesians 4:11 in both English and Spanish (as well as other languages) is not the Greek, but rather the Latin Vulgate. The Vulgate predates the other translations and both translators were intimately acquainted with it, as it was in fact their Bible. The Vulgate version of Ephesians 4:11 is, “et ipse dedit **quosdam** quidem apostolos **quosdam autem** prophetas **alios vero** evangelistas **alios autem** pastores et doctores”. What is often *supplied* in English (*some, and others, etc.*) is stated very clearly in the Vulgata. This points to further evidence that the TT supplies words, not to clarify the context, but rather because those words, while not in the Greek, are required by their adherence to their historical source, i.e., the Vulgata.

By all accounts, this reading in Latin is of ancient origin. Just how this translation crept into the Western tradition is a matter for further research and debate, but while this is a fascinating

question (at least to this author), perhaps there are other observations which are even more pertinent for us today.

One such example is the power of subconscious presuppositions or associations which influence us without our knowledge. What we know best or what we know most intimately, seems to exercise a powerful influence over our minds and actions. Perhaps the TT just sounded better or made more sense to Tyndale and Casiodoro de Reina. After all, it is what they knew, and even centuries later, this same translation continues to be repeated, perhaps for the very same reasons. This serves as a pregnant reminder that no one is neutral. We all bring baggage and prior experience to the table when we work with the Biblical text. It may not come in the form of an ancient translation from the Latin Vulgate, but they are there, lurking in the background, just waiting to show themselves. I don't believe that this is entirely avoidable. I do, however, suggest that being aware that such preconceptions exists can make us more self-aware and critical, and perhaps will have an over-all positive impact on our work as translators, consultants, exegetes or collaborators in the translations process, diminishing (if nothing else) the risks inherent in the task of Bible translation and interpretation.