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### Party, Sect or Heresy

By Jim Myers

αἵρεσις

Translators create a great deal of the confusion by the inconsistent way they translate the Greek and Hebrew words of the ancient Biblical texts. In this article we are going to look at the translations they selected for the above word that is found in the *Book of Acts*. Below are the suggested translations from a Greek dictionary:

Strictly, a choice or option; (1) of a separatist group characterized by loyalty to a certain school of thought and practice *sect, party, school*; (2) of such separatist groups claiming status within the Christian community *sect, party, division*.

The translations we are going to review are:

- (1) **King James Version** 1769
- (2) **Douay-Rheims Version** 1899
- (3) **New American Standard Version** 1977
- (4) **New International Version** 1984
- (5) **New Living Translation** 1989

#### Acts 5:17

**KJV** - Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the **sect** of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation.

**D-RV** - Then the high priest rising up, and all they that were with him (which is the **heresy** of the Sadducees) were filled with envy.

**NASV** - But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the **sect** of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy.

**NIV** - Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the **party** of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy.

**NLT** - The high priest and his friends, who were Sadducees, reacted with violent jealousy.

Now let's review the work of this group of translators. The translators of the **KJV** and **NASV** chose "**sect**" as their translation. The **NIV** translators opted for "**party**." Both are given in the dictionary choices. The NLT translators simply ignored the word and didn't translate it. The **D-RV** translators did something else, they neither selected one of the options given in the dictionary nor did they didn't ignore it – they **transliterated** the Greek word instead of translating it.

Before I discuss the transliteration process I want to point out the effect that their decision has on modern readers. Read the two statements below and think about what they mean to you.

- (1) The members of the Sadducees were members of a Jewish sect or party.
- (2) The members of the Sadducees were heretics.

Do the statements create different mental images of the people who were Sadducees? How different are those perceptions?

What does the word “heresy” mean to a modern reader? The Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary defines it as follows:

- (1) *Adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma.*
- (2) *Denial of revealed truth by a baptized member of the Roman Catholic Church.*
- (3) *An opinion contrary to the truth or to generally accepted beliefs.*

If someone pointed to a man named “Ralph” and told you that “*Ralph was a heretic,*” what would that mean to you? I would have thought that Ralph was a “**bad**” guy, someone I should stay a long ways from. I was taught that the believers were the good guys and the heretics were the really bad guys.

When translators examine a foreign word they have three choices as to what action to take.

- (1) **Translate** – transport the meaning of the word from the original language to the language of their translation.
- (2) **Transliterate** – transport the symbols (letters) from the original language to the language of the translation by using the equivalent letters.
- (3) **Ignore it and write nothing**. The reader of the translation will never know they left it out.

### Transliteration Process

αἵρεσις

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
α	ι	ρ	ε	σ	ι	ς	
H	A	I	R	E	S	I	S

The transliteration process is very simple and it is something that every Bible reader should learn to

do. **First**, look at the Greek word as it appears in the ancient Greek text. **Next**, using the standard transliteration guidelines, convert the Greek letters and symbols into their English equivalents. In this example we have a special situation in which one of the symbols that appear above the second letter is transliterated as the first English letter of the word. After we finish replacing the Greek letters with their English equivalents we have the English word – **HAIREISIS** – which became the modern word **HERESY**.

### Identifying the Belief Systems of Translators

After you compare different translations for a while, you will recognize the fact that the Belief Systems of the translators play a dominant role in their choices. The translators of the **KJV**, **NASV** and **NIV** understood the text to say that the “a high priest rose up whose associates belonged to a Jewish sect named the Sadducees.” *This fits well within the cultural and historical context of the event recorded in the text.*

The **D-RV** is a translation made by the Roman Catholic Church. Remember, one of the definitions of “heresy” in Webster’s was – “Adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma.” In 1899 when this translation was made by the group of Roman Catholic translators the above definition had been in place for centuries. From their perspective the Sadducees would have clearly “*adhered to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma.*” Of course, so would every other Jewish sect.

Since the Sadducees were around long before the birth of Jesus, the **D-RV** translators’ decision to use the negative term “heresy” seems to ignore the rule of presenting information in its historical and cultural context. The Sadducees were just one of the many Jewish sects. The reader wouldn’t be concerned about whether they were the good or bad guys if they had translated the word instead of transliterating it.

I will continue this study in the next issue and we will see how consistent the translators were in the **Book of Acts**. **BHR**

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