

Hebrews 13:17 in the Greek

First, the word sometimes translated “obey” in this verse is the Greek word $\pi\epsilon\iota\theta\omega$. BAGD has several meanings for this word, including in the active voice the following: “to cause to come to a particular point of view or course of action; convince” (cf. Acts 18:4; 28:23), “convincing, not compelling.” It can mean “persuade, appeal to” as in 2 Cor 5:11; Gal 1:10; Acts 13:43; Acts 26:28; Mt 27:20. It can also mean “win over, strive to please” as in Acts 12:20; 14:19; Gal 1:10.¹ In the active, it clearly has the idea of convincing, persuading, or influencing.

In the passive and middle voices, except for the perfect, it can be translated: “to be won over as the result of persuasion; to be persuaded, believe” (Lk 16:31; Acts 17:4; Heb 11:13, v.1) and also (Acts 21:14; 28:24; 26:26, 28, v.1; Heb 13:18).² In the passive and middle voice with a dative of person or thing—as in Hebrews 13:17—it can usually be translated “obey, follow” as in Rom 2:8; Gal 3:1, v.1; 5:7; Heb 13:17; Js 3:3.³ However, BAGD says that “some passages stand between [the 2nd perfect with pluperfect meaning] and [the passive and middle voices meaning] and permit either translation with dative ‘be persuaded by someone, take someone’s advice, or obey or follow someone.’”⁴

In the case of Hebrews 13:17, then, the word $\pi\epsilon\iota\theta\omega$ in the middle voice should be translated as “allow yourselves to be persuaded by,” rather than “obey.” This translation fits the lexical possibility, fits the context of the book of Hebrews, and also fits the biblical theology of the basis for spiritual authority being persuasion based on truth and trust, not position.

¹ BAGD, 791

² BAGD, 792

³ BAGD, 792

⁴ BAGD, 792 (cf. Acts 5:36f, 39; 23:21; 27:11 (objection of a passenger, to which the crew paid no attention and suffered harm as a result: Chion, Ep. 4, 1... Of relation between heretical leaders and their adherents Iren. 3, 12, 5 [Harv. II 58, 10])” (BAGD, 792).

What about the word often translated “leaders” in this verse? The Greek word is the present participle ἡγέομαι, which means “to be in a supervisory capacity, lead, guide” (cf. Lk 22:26; Mt 2:6; Acts 7:10; Heb 13:7, 17, 24; Acts 15:22; 14:12)” (BAGD, 434). The idea is of a person who guides others on a path; a leading man among the brothers. We can picture a guide on a mountainside, leading a group of hikers on a path marked with blazes. The hikers trust the leader because of his demonstrated knowledge and good character; and they can see the blazes on the trail as he leads them. However, they do not follow him blindly, as though they wore blindfolds. They would not consent to follow him off a cliff. They are persuaded by his truth and trustworthiness, and they engage critically as they walk along, allowing themselves to be persuaded by him. Interestingly, another meaning of this participle form is “to engage in an intellectual process; think, consider, regard” (cf. 2 Cor 9:5; Phil 2:25; Heb 10:29; 11:11, 26 and many others).⁵

This is a different nuance than the noun-form of the word, ἡγεμών, which means “one who rules, especially in a preeminent position, ruler” as in Mt 2:6, or “head imperial provincial administrator, governor” (Mt 10:18; 27:2, 11, 14, 21, 23, 27; Mk 13:9; Lk 21:12; 1 Pet 2:14; Acts 23:24, 26, 33; 24:1, 10; 26:30) which all refer to secular authorities who wielded undisputed power (BAGD, 433).

The word often translated “submit” in this verse is the most interesting of all. It is not the word we would expect to find, ὑπακούω, which means “to follow instructions, obey, follow, be subject to” (cf. Eph 6:1; Col 3:20; Eph 6:5; Col 3:22; Rom 6:16; 1 Pet 3:6; Heb 5:9; Phil 2:12; Lk 8:25; 17:6; or the enforced obedience of hostile spirits, Mk. 1:27 or of the elements Mt 8:27).⁶ Instead, it is the hapaxlegomenon ὑπέικω, which is hard to define because it occurs only here in the NT. BAGD says, “(Hom. et al.) prim. ‘withdraw, give way to’, then by fig. extension ‘to yield to someone’s authority, yield, give way, submit’ (Hom. et al.; 4 Macc 6:35; TestSol 12:1 C;

⁵ BAGD, 434

⁶ BAGD, 1028-1029

TestAbr A 9 p.86, 30 [Stone p.20]” (BAGD, 1030). Indeed, while many translations again add “obey” to the second half of Hebrews 13:17, the word is not included in scripture. Translators supply the same referent already translated in the first half of the verse.

The word translated “keep watch” is ἀγρυπνέω in the Greek. This can mean “to be vigilant in awareness of threatening peril, be alert, be on the alert, keep watch over something, be on guard” as in Mk 13:33; Lk 21:36 (BAGD, 16); or, as in this verse, it means “to be alertly concerned about, look after, care for” as in Heb 13:17 and Eph 6:18 (BAGD, 16). Shepherds care for their sheep.

Finally, the word translated “they must give an account” is ἀποδίδομι, means literally “to meet a contractual or other obligation, pay, pay out, fulfill” as in Mt 20:8; 21:41; 22:21; Mk 12:17; Acts 4:33; 1 Cor 7:3; Rom 13:7 and especially of giving account for one’s responsibilities: Mt 12:36; Lk 16:2; Acts 19:40; Rom 14:12; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 4:5 (BAGD, 109-110). This is the duty of all spiritual leaders.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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