

## Interpreting the Bible Ray L. Winstead



I pray for myself a continual discernment of the truth of what God is trying to tell me through the words of the Bible. I believe too many people today - regardless of their prayerful sincerity - misunderstand many important words and ideas presented in the Bible. Even besides different contexts - which present their own problems in trying to understand what is in the Bible - the English translations we read today imply different current meanings than the words and concepts translated from the original intent of the words as they were originally written in Hebrew and Greek long ago. I believe that many of these misunderstandings are at the heart of current controversies in the different denominations of The Church and certainly do not further The Kingdom of God - regardless of the sincerity of "the different sides." Thinking that all the English words in the different Bible versions of today accurately reflect the true meaning of the original writings of the past is not reasonable, and you can be convinced of this with just some more study on your own. Check it out for yourself! This is not to mean to throw out the Bible, but it

does mean that we must be careful in reading it. I do believe that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God (sola scriptura).

Consider two examples of possible mistranslations that may not be what was originally meant and that have caused misinterpretations of Bible passages. One mistranslation may be considered minor – but the other major.

I. Probable minor mistranslation that doesn't really change the main intent or outcome of the original story – but is still carried on today as a prominent detail of the Bible story.

In this example, Jesus very likely was not referring to a domestic bird at all when the word “Rooster” or “Cock” is used in English translations of Luke 22:34 - but a Roman wind instrument (in the same category as a trumpet) announcing the time of the changing of the Roman guard. In today's world, an accurate interpretation of the Bible must rely upon much more than just a literal understanding of the way a word would be used today. Historical context is also necessary. In this case for additional background, for example, according to the Mishna, poultry were forbidden in Jerusalem (in spite of later artist representations to the contrary - based on a likely misunderstanding of the word used). See the article below.

“Before the Rooster Crows” (as reported in <http://acts242study.com/before-the-rooster-crows/> )

Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.” – Luke 22:34

Peter replied, “Man, I don't know what you're talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed.” – Luke 22:60

Read also: Matthew 26:34, 74-75; Mark 14:30, 66-68; Luke 22:34, 60-68; John 13:38 and John 18:27



Here is an interesting piece of information that I learned from my rabbi recently while studying the story of the crucifixion. It doesn't change the story in any way and is a fact that can't be confirmed with certainty, but it is something fun to think about. However, it does point out again, as we have seen so many times, that we have a hard time understanding some of the sayings of Jesus because we didn't live in that time period and don't know the idioms they used or what the original wording might have meant.

All four gospels tell the story of Peter denying Jesus during His arrest and trial. Immediately after the third denial, Peter hears a rooster crow. Was there a rooster in the area where the trial took place in upper Jerusalem that crowed at that moment or was it something else? Or, did we miss something? Let's take a look. First of all, according to the Mishna ([Baba Kamma vii7](#)) poultry were forbidden in Jerusalem, "on account of the holy things", or "on account of the sanctuary".

"No cocks or hens must be raised in Jerusalem (even by laymen), because of the voluntary offerings (the meat of which may be eaten in any part of the city, and as the habit of the named fowls is to peck with their beaks in the rubbish, they may peck into a dead reptile and then peck in the meat of the offerings). In all other parts of Palestine priests only must not raise them, as they use leave-offerings for their meals, and they must be very careful about cleanliness."

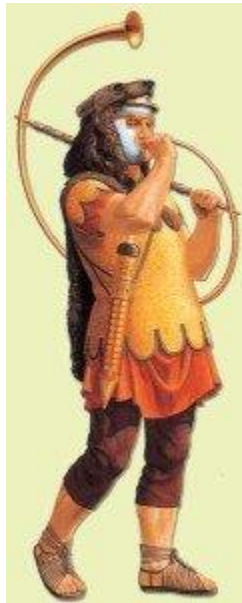
The fear was because they are such a messy animal, their presence might defile some of the holy items used in the sacrifices that were to be eaten. Could this be possible that it wasn't a rooster? We've all seen and heard the rooster crowing in plays and on the movie programs!

If it wasn't a rooster, what was it? The answer lies in the division of the night watches during Jesus' time. The Romans divided each day into three hour blocks

and the night blocks were called watches (see also study Bible notes on Matthew 14:25). The first night watch began at 6:00 p.m. and lasted until 9:00 p.m. The second watch ended at midnight, the third at 3:00 a.m., and the 4th at 6:00 a.m. or sunrise. Jesus seems to confirm this when He tells the disciples in an earlier story in Mark 13:35 of these same four divisions:

“Therefore, keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. – Mark 13:35”

Notice that Jesus calls the 3rd watch, “the rooster crows”, and makes a distinction between rooster crowing and dawn.



The Romans used the tuba, the cornu (pictured), and the bucina to sound reveille (cock-crow)

The signal the Roman divisions used to change the guard for each shift was a trumpet call. The Latin word for trumpet call (the language spoken by the soldiers) is “gullicinium”, which means, “cock-crowing”. At the end of the 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. shifts, the guard change was announced by a Roman “cock-crowing” or blowing of a trumpet. What Peter heard probably wasn’t an actual rooster crowing, but the end of the watch trumpet call! Jesus used that same phrase to describe it.

Although this knowledge doesn't change the intent or outcome of the Peter story, it is just interesting to see that there are often things from the time period that we may not have understood clearly and therefore get missed in the translation.

II. Possible major mistranslation that may be of major importance to change the main intent of the original concept in the original Bible passages.

One group of scholars maintain that the usual wording used today in English translations of the Bible to indicate that remaining in hell ETERNALLY has been translated incorrectly.

The information below comes directly from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_universalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_universalism) (just a little edited for clarity), and other sources support the following conclusions – at least conclusions worth considering.

Christian Universalists assert that the doctrine of eternal Hell was not a part of Christ's teachings nor even a part of the early church, and that it was added in. The first clear mention of endless misery is to be found in a work from 155 to 165 AD by Tatian. According to theologian Edward Beecher, in the first four centuries there were six main theological schools, and only one of them advocated the idea of eternal hell.

### **Origins of the idea of hell as eternal**

Christian universalists point towards mistranslations of the Greek word αἰών (*aion* – an epoch of time), as giving rise to the idea of eternal hell. Dr. Ken Vincent writes "When it (*aion*) was translated into the Latin Vulgate Bible, *aion* became *aeternam* which means 'eternal'." [Wikipedia: The Vulgate is the principal Latin version of the Bible, prepared mainly by St. Jerome in the late 4th century, and (as revised in 1592) adopted as the official text for the Roman Catholic Church.]

He also states that the first written record of the idea of an eternal hell comes from Tertullian, who wrote in Latin.

The second major source of the idea of hell as being eternal was the 4th-century theologian Augustine. According to author Steve Gregg, it was Tertullian's writings, plus Augustine's views and writings on eternal hell, which "overwhelmed" the other views of a temporary hell. First Augustine's views of hell were accepted in the early Latin Church. Up until the Reformation, Augustine's view of hell as eternal was not questioned.

### **Mistranslation of the Greek word *aion***

About the word *aion* as having connotations of "age" or "temporal", the 19th-century theologian Marvin Vincent wrote:

*Aion*, transliterated aeon, is a period of longer or shorter duration, having a beginning and an end, and complete in itself. Aristotle (*peri ouranou*, i. 9,15) says: "The period which includes the whole time of one's life is called the aeon of each one." Hence it often means the life of a man, as in Homer, where one's life (*aion*) is said to leave him or to consume away (*Iliad* v. 685; *Odyssey* v. 160). It is not, however, limited to human life; it signifies any period in the course of events, as the period or age before Christ; the period of the millennium; the mythological period before the beginnings of history.

The adjective *aionios* in like manner carries the idea of time. Neither the noun nor the adjective, in themselves, carry the sense of endless or everlasting. They may acquire that sense by their connotation, as, on the other hand, *aidios*, which means everlasting, has its meaning limited to a given point of time in Jude 6. *Aionios* means enduring through or pertaining to a period of time. Both the noun and the adjective are applied to limited periods.

### **Arguments against the idea of eternal hell**

Author Thomas Talbott states that if one believes in the idea of eternal hell or that some souls will be destroyed, one must either let go of the idea that it is God's wish and desire to save all beings, or accept the idea that God wants to, but will not "successfully accomplish his will and satisfy his own desire in this matter".

Author David Burnfield defends the postmortem view that God continues to evangelize to people even after they die (1 Chronicles 16:34; Isaiah 9:2; Romans 8:35–39; Ephesians 4:8–9; 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6).

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Many, many other examples of this concept that the words in our English translations of the Bible may not really mean what we think they mean are common. Check it out for yourself! If we are really serious about understanding what is in the Bible, then we must be serious about studying the Bible from an exegesis and hermeneutics perspective.

I certainly don't claim to know the truth myself - but I do claim a heartfelt attempt at that objective.

Especially note that my own view overall, not directly related to the specific examples above of the general idea of being careful about mistranslations, is that I believe everything in the Bible is meant to be interpreted within the context of what Jesus said about Love, i.e., I believe in a "Love First Theology." Such an overall view, I believe, is essential to better understand the Bible and what Jesus is

trying to tell us. Interpretations outside this general principle I believe are, at least, suspect and definitely worth further prayer and investigation. This point of view is especially important when considering words such as “Toevah” within the context of homosexuality being an abomination unto itself – rather than more simply having the meaning at the time of being part of a list of behaviors to ensure the avoidance of interacting with people who are not Jews, e.g., prohibiting the practice of participating in homosexual behavior in the heathen temple to encourage the heathen gods to provide better conditions for their crops. For my own, more detailed views on this topic, see my position statement “Homosexuality and the Church:” (<https://raywinstead.com/Homosexuality-Church.shtm>)

All of this is also within the context of my essay “I am an amoeba.” (<https://raywinstead.com/amoeba.shtm>) “My trying to fully understand God is like an amoeba trying to understand me! Just as an amoeba can have no chance of understanding me, I am also an amoeba who cannot really understand God.”