

Translating Connectives in the New Testament

By David Kuske

It is a natural corollary of the doctrine of verbal inspiration that one does not leave any part of the New Testament text out of a translation. But the question is, “Does this mean that we have to translate the connectives in the NT with English words, or can we ‘translate’ some of them in ways that reflect the meaning better than a literal translation of these words would do?”

Let’s put this question another way. The early Greek texts of the NT that have come down to us were copied using a certain number of letters per line (often breaking words in two at the end of a line) with no spaces between the letters or words. So we might ask, “In the written text of the NT, did the authors use any devices to indicate both major and minor breaks in thought since these breaks were not indicated in the same way that we mark them in contemporary English?”

Prof. Frederick Blume of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was convinced this was the case (a perspective he gained from his studies under Goodspeed and as a student with Metzger and Colwell at the University of Chicago). In short, the idea is that when the Greeks wrote with no spaces between words, paragraphs, and sections, they had another way of signaling a transition/pause/new subject to the reader. We do it with commas, periods, paragraphs, and section headings. They apparently did it with *καί* or *δέ* and sometimes by the repeated use of a word or phrase that was unique to specific writers. Some examples of the latter will be discussed later in this article: *τοτε, και ευθως, εγενετο, ουν*. Prof. Blume had this topic approved as the focus of his doctoral thesis, but by the time he was able to consider writing his thesis, the University of Chicago’s New Testament department had drifted so heavily into historical-critical interpretation that he abandoned this endeavor. But Prof. Blume was not alone in thinking along these lines; contemporary Greek grammars and lexicons also reflect this usage, although not consistently or universally in each instance.

If what was stated in the previous paragraph is the case, translating these transitional markers with words is redundant in the sense that they really are being “translated” when we in English use commas, periods, exclamation points, paragraph and section breaks, etc. To do both (i.e. use commas, periods, exclamation points, etc. and also to translate these transitional markers with words) can result in a ponderous text to read in English.

For example, a literal translation of every *καί* with “and” would mean that the beginning of almost every section of Mark 2-4 would begin with “And . . .” Take a moment to page through the Greek text of these chapters in the UBS text and look at the first word wherever the UBS text begins a new paragraph or section. Almost all begin with *καί*. The UBS editors apparently felt each of these was the indication of a break in thought. Then look at the NIV text in the corresponding verses. In most instances the NIV (apparently taking a cue from the UBS text) did not translate “And,” but began a new paragraph or section. In a couple instances the NIV did translate “Then” or “also.” Did the NIV do wrong by not translating every *καί*? Or perhaps it would be better to ask, “Did the NIV do right by ‘translating’ *καί* at times with a new paragraph or new section in some instances?”

In his grammar text (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, page 671), Daniel Wallace says: “The major connective conjunctions are *καί* and *δέ*. *Δέ* as a connective conjunction may often be left untranslated.” He might have said the same of *καί* —as the previous paragraph was meant to demonstrate, and as can be demonstrated throughout the NT. But his point might be expanded a bit to say that when *καί* or *δέ* is left untranslated, we in a sense do “translate” by reflecting these connectives in English with a period, colon, or question mark and by beginning a new sentence, paragraph, or section.

Guideline: When και appears in a context where a time sequence is evident, it may be translated with “then.” When consecutive action is evident, it may be translated with “and” in a compound sentence. In other contexts where a transition to a new thought is evident, it may be “translated” with a punctuation mark such as a period and by beginning a new sentence, paragraph, or section. The same is true of δε. When in context δε is not expressing a contrast (“but”) or is not expressing consecutive action, it may be “translated” by using a punctuation mark such as a period and beginning a new sentence, paragraph, or section.

It is interesting that the NT authors who wrote books that are mainly narrative (Mt, Mk, Lk, John, Acts) seem to use other words in addition to και and δε that serve to indicate a major or minor break in thought. Each narrative author has his own expression to do this: Matthew uses τότε; Mark και ευθως; Luke και εγενετο or εγενετο; and John ουν. Lexicons and grammars are not consistent in dealing with these usages, but they are noted to a greater or lesser degree in these sources, as will be noted below.

In Matthew, look at the UBS text of chapters 2-4 and note that τότε begins sections at 2:7, 2:16, 3:13, 4:1, 4:5, and 4:11. The NIV translates with “Then” in all but one instance. Other translations (ESV, NASB, HCSB, ISV) sometimes translate “then” but at other times just begin a new section. It should be noted that a problem arises in translating τότε with “then” every time Matthew uses this word. The implication of “then” would be that the following section occurred immediately or shortly after the preceding. But at times when we compare that following section in Matthew with the same account in one of the other gospels, it is evident that that following section was not sequential in time. Matthew often groups similar things instead of always following a time sequence. So it may make one book contradict another by always translating τότε in Matthew as indicating a time sequence instead of “translating” by beginning a new paragraph or section. Note that this caution about τότε is peculiar to Matthew’s gospel and does not apply in any other NT book because it seems that he alone uses it at times as a transitional marker. In its discussion of τότε, BDAG notes that τότε is “a special favorite of Matthew who uses it about 90 times.”

Guideline: In Matthew, when the context indicates that what follows is not necessarily sequential action, it may be sufficient to “translate” with a punctuation mark such as a period and by beginning a new sentence, paragraph, or section.

What was just said about Matthew is also true of Mark’s use of και ευθως. More so than τότε these words often indicate sequential action (“and immediately”). However, like the use of τότε in Matthew, a comparative study of the Synoptics indicates that sections beginning with και ευθως are not always sequential, but may indicate instead that Mark is saying in essence, “The next important thing I want to tell you about is . . .” BDAG hints at this in its treatment of ευθως when it says in subpoint 2 that the meaning is at times weakened to an inferential sense. An example of this is the NET translation of Mk 1:21 where a note is added saying, “ευθως has not been translated here. It sometimes occurs with a weakened, inferential use . . . not contributing significantly to the flow of the narrative.” When και ευθως is used right next to the main verb of a sentence it always indicates a time sequence. Otherwise it may just be transitional. It should also be noted that this is the case only in Mark and not in any other NT book. Moulton’s *Grammar of NT Greek* (volume III, page 229) says this: “Mark uses ευθως only five times near the verb, i.e. as an adverb... elsewhere it is probably merely a connective conjunction, occurring at the beginning of its clause... Some thirty of these instances are και ευθως: *and so* (consecutive).”

Guideline: When και ευθως is used in Mark right next to a verb it should be translated in a way that indicates a close time sequence (e.g. “and immediately” or “immediately”). Otherwise, when the context indicates that the text is moving on to a new thought, it may be sufficient to “translate” και ευθως with a punctuation mark such as a period and by beginning a new sentence, paragraph, or section.

A similar transitional word in Luke is και εγενετο or εγενετο. Page through the UBS text of chapters 5 and 6 in Luke and note 5:1, 5:12, 5:17, 6:1, 6:6, and 6:12. Each of these verses begins with Luke’s oft-used expression, but the NIV does not translate with “and it happened” in any of these instances, but simply begins a new sentence/paragraph/section. That Luke fell into the pattern of using this expression fairly often is not surprising. It seems that, since Luke was not a Jew, he read the OT in the Septuagint which uses και εγενετο and εγενετο to translate the oft-used Hebrew expression “it happened.” In this way, apparently this expression became a part of his way of writing. When Luke uses και εγενετο without a conjunction leading to the main verb in the sentence, one doesn’t really reflect the Greek by putting in a conjunction (e.g. "And it happened *and* Jesus went into the city." This doesn’t flow well for an English reader. The same is true of making the main verb in the sentence subordinate to και εγενετο ("And it happened *that* Jesus went into the city."). Other NT writers also use this expression on occasion as Luke does. But in Luke it is used far more than in the other NT books as a transitional marker.

Guideline: Especially in Luke and Acts, but at times also in other NT books, it may be sufficient (when the context suggests the text is moving on to a new thought) to “translate” the Hebraism εγενετο or και εγενετο with a punctuation mark such as a period and by beginning a new sentence, paragraph, or section.

A final example of this kind is John’s use of ουν. Page through chapters 6-8 and note 6:14, 6:41, 6:52, 6:53, 6:60, 7:25, 7:40, 7:45, 8:12, 8:21, and 8:31. Ουν is used in each instance at the beginning of a new paragraph or section in the UBS text, but the NIV translates this word in only two instances and even then with a word other than “therefore.” Instead, the NIV begins a new sentence, paragraph, or section following the pattern of the UBS text. BDAG comments on John’s use of ουν (subpoint 2,b): “Ουν serves to indicate a transition to something new, especially in the Gospel of John.” “John boldly uses ουν alone and needs no apology for doing so. It just carries along the narrative with no necessary thought of cause or result (Robertson 1191)” But note the words “especially in the Gospel of John.” Other writers on occasion also use ουν as a transitional marker, but it is predominately John who does so.

Guideline: Especially in John, but at times also in other NT books, it may be sufficient (when the context suggests that the text is moving on to a new thought) to “translate” ουν with a punctuation mark such as a period and by beginning a new sentence, paragraph or section.

As was noted at the beginning, it is important that a translation reflect the meaning of the original text fully, clearly, and accurately. But as this article has attempted to show, we can “translate” transitional markers fully, clearly, and often more accurately in English with various devices rather than with a literal translation with words. Hopefully the guidelines that are suggested are helpful in applying this principle.

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