

## Laity

The justification for frequently retranslating the Bible is the dynamic nature of language. Words change meaning over time, nuances vary, and new words are invented. “Simplicity,” in Romans 12:8, no longer means “liberality” or “generously” (Strong’s Dictionary of Greek) in today’s English but “the state, quality, or an instance of being simple (Random House Webster’s Dictionary). To “be simple” in your contribution misses the meaning in the original Greek, so a retranslation to “generous” or “liberal” is helpful.

However, it is often the case that doctrinal biases creep into translations. While I believe that the New King James Bible is one of the better translations on the market today, it is not totally free from this malady, as is evident in 2 Chronicles 35:5, where “lay people” is used.

*“And stand in the holy place according to the divisions of the fathers’ houses of your brethren the lay people, and according to the division of the father’s house of the Levites”* (emp. JDS, cf. 7, 12, 13).

A good translation will indicate where the translators have supplied extra words. In the New King James Bible, these additions are in *italics*. This is a very helpful translation tool. It is unfortunate that many use inferior, often perverted Dynamic Equivalent translations (NIV, TEV, etc.) where the very theory for translating allows the translators to substitute what they think God meant by His words, instead of translating God’s words and allowing the reader to determine what He meant, making DE translations more susceptible to the encroachments of doctrinal error. Therefore, in the NKJB, “*lay*” is in italics, meaning the translators were trying to help us understand something about the term “people.” But what were they trying to help us understand?

Efforts to distinguish between laity and clergy are historically recent. God did not make such distinctions in the Old Testament. Priests were from the tribe of Levi. If one was not a Levite, one was not a priest (Hebrews 7:13-14) but it does not follow that they were “laity.” Translating a text retroactively to leave one with the notion that “lay” is a biblically distinctive term is a mistranslation.

There is denominational baggage in this term, too. For centuries, “clergy” has implied a distinction in status, as in the Dark Ages of medieval history where royalty, nobility, and “clergy” were the three upper echelons of human society. This artificial hierarchy also placed laity in a lower spiritual status than the clergy, eventually leading to traditions that abused the notion of sainthood, *i.e.*, applying it only to dead, religious heroes (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:2).

The Bible teaches, that, if you are a Christian, “*you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people*” (1 Peter 2:9). There are no divisions between a Levitical priesthood and the rest of God’s people anymore. And, there certainly isn’t, and never was, a distinction in their spiritual status. Whatever translation you use, note and correct its weaknesses as you study.