
Classics / Biblical Studies

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Plucking out the Right Eye

"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell"
(Matthew 5:29)

Summary: translation issues—meaning of phrase—example—the “right” eye—similar statements—confusion in the use of the phrase.

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This saying is not so hard in the RSV form in which it has just been quoted as it is in

some older versions. The AV says, "If thy right eye offend thee." which is generally meaningless to readers today. The verb "offend" no longer means "trip up" or anything like that, which in literary usage it still did in 1611.

Less excusable is the RV rendering, "If thy right eye causeth thee to stumble...", because this introduced an archaism which was long since obsolete in 1881 (when the Revised Version was published).

The Revised Standard Version (RSV) rendering, however, is more intelligible. It means, in effect: "Don't let your eye lead you into sin." How could it do that? By resting too long on an object of temptation. Matthew places this saying immediately after Jesus' words about adultery in the heart, and that is probably the original context, for it

provides a ready example of how a man's eye could lead him into sin.

In the most notable case of adultery in the Old Testament – king David's adultery with the wife of Uriah the Hittite – the trouble began when, late one afternoon, David from his palace roof saw the lady bathing (2 Samuel 11:2). Jesus says, "Better pluck out your eye – even your right eye (as being presumably the more precious of the two – than allow it to lead you into sin. It is better to enter into eternal life with one eye than to be thrown into Gehenna (as a result of that sin) with two."

Matthew follows up this saying about the right eye with a similar one about the right hand. This strong assertion seems to have stayed with the hearers. It is repeated in Matthew 18:8-9 (in dependence on Mark 9:43-48), where

the foot is mentioned in addition to the eye and the hand.

Shortly after the publication of William Tyndale's English New Testament, there was an attempt to restrict its circulation on the ground that the simple reader might mistakenly take such language literally and "pluck out his eyes, and so the whole realm will be full of blind men, to the great decay of the nation and the manifest loss of the King's grace; and thus by reading of the Holy Scriptures will the whole realm come into confusion."

So, a preaching friar is said to have declared in a Cambridge sermon; but he met his match in Hugh Latimer who, in a sermon preached the following Sunday, said that simple people were well able to distinguish between literal and figurative terms. "For example," Latimer went on,

"if we paint a fox preaching in a friar's hood, nobody imagines that a fox is meant, but that craft and hypocrisy are described, which so often are found disguised in that garb."

In fact, it is not recorded that anyone ever mutilated himself because of these words in the Gospels. There is indeed the case of Origen, but if the story is true that he made himself a eunuch "for the kingdom of heaven's sake," that was in response to another saying, at which we shall look later.