

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

## ANATHEMA FROM CHRIST.

ROMANS ix. 3.

KING JAMES'S VERSION OF 1611.—“*For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*”

THE WRITER'S REVISED VERSION.—“*For I could wish to God to be myself accursed from the Christ, for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*”

EDITOR'S VERSION (for the benefit of those who do not read Greek).—“*For I could wish to God to be myself anathema from the Christ, for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*”

THIS very solemn declaration has much “exercised” theologians, and has hence occasioned considerable perplexity to expositors. In the writer's “Exposition of the Ninth Chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans,” published in 1849, he regarded the first half of the verse as parenthetical; and he thus connected directly the words of the second moiety, *for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh*, with the affirmation of the second verse, *that I have great grief and continual sorrow in my heart*. The parenthesis he translated thus (*for I myself used to wish to be accursed from the Messiah*). He looked upon the Apostle as thus referring to his own infatuation, during the time of his antagonism to Christ and Christianity, for the purpose of obliquely depicting, from the standpoint of his own experience, the lamentable spiritual condition of his countrymen, and of thus accounting for the overwhelming sorrow under which, in virtue of the genuine sympathy of his heart, he was suffering. The same interpretation, substantially, had been given to the passage by Glas, Bowyer, Wakefield, Toplady, Belsham, Rodolphus Dickinson, Walford, Craik. All of these throw the

first moiety of the verse into a parenthesis, and obliterate the full-point at the conclusion of the second verse. Wakefield's rendering of the parenthesis is (*for I also was once an alien from Christ*). Belsham's is (*for I myself once gloried in being an alien from Christ*). Tregelles seems to have taken the same view, for he encloses the first moiety of the verse in a parenthesis. Others, without the parenthetical expedient, give substantially the same interpretation. They regard the words which, in our 1849 "Exposition," we included within parenthesis, as descriptive of the Apostle's mental condition while he was yet an opponent of Christianity. But they connect the two moieties of the verse in such a way as to indicate that it was in the interest of his countrymen that he had patriotically desired to be separated, as by an awful curse, from Christ. This is Heumann's interpretation in his Monograph, and Trautmann's in his Monograph, and also Dr. Chalmers's. It would seem to have been Luther's also, and Tyndale's, and Coverdale's. The author of the Latin *Itala* had taken the same view, so far at least. He rendered the word, not potentially, but historically, *I was wishing*,<sup>1</sup> viz., at a former period, though not now; *I was*, viz., at a former period, *in the habit of wishing*. This translation was continued in the Vulgate, and was accepted and commented on by Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, Primasius. Ambrosiaster says, "*I was wishing*, not, *I do wish*."<sup>2</sup> Pelagius says, "*I was wishing*—formerly, when I was a persecutor of Christ."<sup>3</sup> Primasius says, "*I was wishing* formerly, not *I could*

<sup>1</sup> "Optabam."

<sup>2</sup> "Optabam, non opto."

<sup>3</sup> "Optabam aliquando cum persequerer Christum."

*now wish.*"<sup>1</sup> Wycliffe followed the Vulgate. His translation of the clause is, "Forsothe I my silf desyride for to be cursid fro Crist." The Rheims version corresponds, "For I wished myself to be anathema from Christ."

It cannot be objected to this interpretation that it attributes to the verb an unnatural or unidiomatic import; for the imperfect tense in Greek, as in Latin, naturally denotes repeated, continued, persistent, or habitual action in past time. And sometimes the reference to the particular portion of past time in which such action took place is only indirectly indicated, as when it is said, in Mark xv. 6, "Now at that feast he *released* unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired." The meaning is, "Now at that feast *he was wont to release* unto them one prisoner." (Comp. Matt. xxvii. 15.)

Nevertheless, even in the case of such a passage as Mark xv. 6 there is reference, though indirect, to the particular portion of past time during which the repeated action of the Roman procurator took place. It was the portion which embraced those recurrent seasons of the Passover feast which had occurred during Pilate's procuratorship. It was at *the annual festival time* that he paid the Jewish people the compliment specified. But as regards Romans ix. 3, there is no reference, beyond the verb itself, to the past as past; and, as a matter of course, there is not in the verb itself any particularization of any distinct portion of past time. There is nothing corresponding to Pelagius's interpretation, "when I was a persecutor of Christ," or even to the indefinite "once"

<sup>1</sup> "Optabam aliquando, non nunc optarem."

of Wakefield and Belsham. The Apostle does not speak of his "conversation" or conduct "*in time past in the Jews' religion*," when "beyond measure he persistently persecuted the church of God" (Gal. i. 13); and hence it is not likely that his statement here is, like his statement in Galatians i. 13, historical.

This unlikelihood is intensified if it be needful to assume with Tregelles, and the interpreters with whom we were at one in our 1849 "Exposition," that the first moiety of the verse constitutes a strict parenthesis. For we should never assume, especially in the case of ancient and inartificial compositions, the existence of real parentheses, unless we are shut up to the assumption.

But if—with Luther, Heumann, Trautmann, Chalmers, and, apparently too, with the author of the *Itala*, and with all the expositors who founded their interpretation on the Vulgate, such as Emanuel Sa,—the idea of a strict parenthesis be abandoned, then, the unlikelihood of the historical import of the verb is increased to a still greater degree; for it is difficult to see that the fact—if fact it was—of the Apostle's former desire to be anathema from Christ for the sake of his countrymen could be the reason for the great grief and continued sorrow of which he speaks in the second verse. One would naturally suppose that it would be something in the present state of his countrymen, rather than something in his own past experience or conduct, that was rolling in upon his spirit with such overwhelming waves of sadness.

Still further, it is scarcely conceivable that the

Apostle, while yet Saul of Tarsus, wished to be "accursed from Christ." It is quite conceivable, indeed, that at that crisis of his wild fanaticism he might invoke a curse upon himself, provided he did not keep far removed in spirit "from Christ." But this is something very different from wishing himself to be "accursed," and "accursed from Christ," or "accursed in the way of being separated from Christ."

Still further. The Apostle's expression is not simply "accursed from Christ." It is far stronger,— "accursed from *the Christ*," or, "accursed from *the Messiah*." But we may rest assured that as Saul of Tarsus was both an eminently earnest and an eminently ecclesiastical man, he never did wish to be not only "accursed," but so accursed as never to have part or lot in the bliss of the Messiah's reign. We can easily conceive of him pouring contempt and hatred upon Jesus of Nazareth as a mere pretender to Messiahship, and wishing himself to be for ever far away from such a pretender. But we cannot conceive of him feeling—under any pressure, however strong, on his temper or his prejudices—the same contempt and hatred for the ideal Deliverer of his race, to whose advent he was, in common with all the pious of his people, looking longingly and eagerly forward.

Then it is to be still further noted that the best established reading of the first moiety of the verse is not that which would justify the translation given in the "Exposition" referred to,— "for I myself used to wish to be accursed from the Christ." Such a translation could be regarded as bringing out, in

alt-relief, the Apostle's former infatuation, as affording a type or specimen of the present infatuation of his unbelieving countrymen. But the collocation of the words, as given in the manuscripts Ⲛ Ⲁ Ⲗ Ⲕ Ⲙ Ⲓ Ⲙ Ⲓ Ⲙ Ⲓ Ⲙ Ⲓ, and approved of by Lachmann, Tischendorf, and Tregelles, and no doubt the correct order, "for I used to wish to be myself accursed from the Christ,"<sup>1</sup> alters entirely the point of alt-relief or intonation. In the former order the tone might be exhibited thus: *I myself, as well as they*. In the latter it stands thus: *I myself, instead of them*. In the former, the *I myself* takes precedence in intonation of the endurance of the anathema; in the latter, the endurance of the anathema takes precedence of the *I myself*; and hence the clause is no longer capable of being parenthetically descriptive of the identity of the Apostle's own past infatuation with the present infatuation of his unbelieving countrymen. The first moiety of the verse, therefore, cannot constitute a parenthesis, and this being the case, the imperfect verb cannot be translated historically, *I used to wish*: it must be rendered potentially, *I could wish*.

This potential rendering is in perfect accordance with usage, in both classical and biblical Greek. As to the latter, we have instances in Galatians iv. 20 and Acts xxv. 22. The passage in Galatians cannot be translated, as in our present King James's Version, "I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice." It must be rendered, "*I could desire (and did circumstances permit it, I would desire, and carry out my desire)*". The other passage, Acts

<sup>1</sup> ἡνώχουην γὰρ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι αὐτὸς ἐγὼ. The Sinaitic manuscript reads εἶναι before ἀνάθεμα. The old *Received Text* reading was ἡνώχουην γὰρ αὐτὸς ἐγὼ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι.

xxv. 22, runs in King James's Version thus: "I *would also hear* the man myself." It is Agrippa that speaks to Festus, and what he really says is, "I could wish, myself even, to hear the man;" or, still more idiomatically and simply, "I could wish myself to hear the man" (provided it be convenient and agreeable to thee):—"I 'could' wish, and, did I know that it were entirely convenient to thee, and agreeable, I 'would' wish."

It is on the same principle that we are to render the verb before us, *I could desire*. The Apostle did not actually desire to be anathema. He knew that such a desire would never be divinely fulfilled, and hence he did not cherish it. A wise man keeps his desires under control. He has, indirectly, command over them. A pious man takes God's desires and purposes into account, and does not entertain any desire which he knows to be at variance with the Divine will, or with the Divine arrangements that are dependent on the Divine will. Hence it is that the Apostle does not say, *I desire*; he only says, *I could desire*. He would have been willing and wishful to be anathema for his countrymen, provided such an awful self-sacrifice had been in harmony with the will and wish of God, and thus consistent with the best interests of God's immense moral empire. So far as the Apostle himself was concerned, he was ready for the self-sacrifice, provided it should be legitimate on the one hand, and could be efficacious on the other. It would not, however, have been of avail, and hence the wish *was never fully formed*. The potential did not pass into the actual.

It is true, indeed, that the potential translatic



of the verb used by the Apostle, viz., *I could wish*, though doubtless the only correct rendering that is possible in the circumstances, is nevertheless an imperfect reflection of the original "Imperfect" Tense. The idioms of the English and Greek languages are by no means identical. The potential *could* is not actually part and parcel of the Greek Imperfect Tense, although its use in English is, on the present occasion, the best expedient to which we can have recourse, to reproduce substantially the nicety of the original. The Greek Imperfect Tense is really a tense, or time, not a potency. It is a past tense, not present or future. But it is a *past tense incomplete*. It is to be carefully differentiated from a strictly "perfect" time or tense—a tense completed and complete. Hence the real idea of the word is, *I was desiring*. The desire rose up in the Apostle's heart, and to a certain extent he allowed and sanctioned it. Yet only to a certain extent, for a higher desire struck in and controlled it—the desire to be in perfect accord with God's desire and will. Hence his desire to be anathema for his countrymen never was completed and complete. It hung suspended. It remained "imperfect;" that is, it was conditional, and the condition that would have brought it to maturity was never forthcoming. Thus the embryo-desire was in reality but a potency, so that the translation *I could desire* is vindicated.

It may now still further be noticed that the word rendered *I could* "*wish*," or *I could* "*desire*," properly means *I could* "*pray*."<sup>1</sup> Keeling takes note of the fact,<sup>2</sup> and Schrader translates the verb, *I have prayed*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ἠχόμην.

<sup>2</sup> *St. Paul's wish to be accursed from Christ*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> "Ich habe gebetet." *Der Apostel Paulus*, iv. 354.

The word is expressly rendered *pray* in 2 Corinthians xiii. 7 and James v. 16; and it really has the same meaning in 2 Corinthians xiii. 9: "This also *we wish*, even your perfection,"—"This also *we pray for*." The expression doubtless doubles back on the seventh verse, where the true reading is not, *I pray*, but, "*we pray* to God." The word occurs again in 3 John 2, where King James's translators have rendered it, *I wish*; but it really means, *I pray*. It has the same meaning also in Acts xxvii. 29, where King James's translators, following the older English Versions, have far too feebly translated thus: "Then fearing lest we should have fallen upon rocks, they cast four anchors out of the stern, and *wished for* the day." They did more than simply *wish*; they lifted up their desires to their gods, and *prayed for* the break of day. So the Syriac-Peshito correctly translates the word. The word occurs in only one other passage of the New Testament (Acts xxvi. 29), where St. Paul says to Agrippa, "*I would* to God that not only thou," &c. The expression in the original is instinct with the most gentlemanly courtesy,—*I could pray to God*. It is as if he had said, *If I might venture to use the liberty of openly expressing the fulness of my feelings, I would audibly lift up my prayer to God that not only thou, &c.* The Apostle's meaning in Romans ix. 3 would be admirably expressed in our idiomatic phrase, *I could wish to God*.

As to the word *anathema*, *accursed*, or *curse*, that will require a little essay of itself, by-and-by.