

# Exegetical Brief: Conveyed From Heaven - 2 Peter 1:17, 18, 21

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This passage provoked a lengthy discussion in a summer quarter course a year ago. A brief look at the question raised might be in place since this is the epistle text (second lesson) for Transfiguration Sunday this year in Series A.

A form of the verb φέρω appears four times in this brief passage: v 17 ἐνεχθείσης; v 18 ἐνεχθεῖσαν; v 21 ἠνέχθη and φερόμενοι. There are a couple of problems with the way most translations handle this word in these verses.

One problem is that this word is translated quite differently in at least three of the four instances. The NIV translates "came" in v 17 and v 18. Then it translates "had its origin" in v 21a, and in v 21b "carried along." This last translation is the only one that comes somewhat close to the basic meaning of φέρω. Another problem with the English translation of the NIV of the first three instances - and this is true not only of the NIV - is that the translation does not reflect the passive voice of the verb.

What does φέρω mean? Lexicons suggest "to bear, carry, convey" and a few other synonyms. A meaning that is also suggested by Liddell and Scott (subpoint VIII), Thayer (3,c), and BAGD, for contexts where the gods were imagined to be speaking or where the true God speaks, is "to utter, speak (a divine message)." This meaning fits in these verses because this is the context all four times that φέρω is used. The basic meaning of φέρω is still apparent because the basic idea is that a divine message is "conveyed" to humans.

The verb φέρω has this meaning in the active, middle, and passive voices. In the passive voice the subject is usually a word such as "message, statement, declaration," and the sense is that a message was conveyed. The agent who conveyed the message is expressed by the dative or by a prepositional phrase introduced by ὑπό or διά. In the active or middle voice the subject is a person (LS IV, 4). The sense is that a person conveyed a message from a source (often divine) to its intended audience. In the active or middle voice φέρω is similar in meaning to ἀγγέλλω, "to tell, announce" (LS IV, 4).

Several translations reflect this meaning for φέρω in one or more of the four instances in these verses. The *New Century Version* translates "heard the voice of God" in v 17. The *NASB* translates with "utterance" in v 17 and 18. The *Contemporary English Version* translates "by saying" in v 17 and "voice speak" in v 18. The *New Living Translation* translates the "voice called down" in v 17. *God's Word to the Nations* translates "voice speak" in v 17 and 18 and "was spoken" in v 21a.

It is also interesting that in a context like this the word φωνή most likely has a slightly different sense than its more common meaning of "voice" or "sound." Liddell and Scott (subpoint III) suggests the meaning "phrase" or "saying." BAGD cites Ac 13:27 where it has the sense of "well-known saying" and also suggests the meaning "loud or solemn declaration." Any or all of these suggestions would fit in the first two uses of φέρω in vv 17,18 because the words referred to are the solemn declaration that is a well-known saying. These words that God spoke at Jesus' transfiguration near the end of his public ministry are a repetition of what God said earlier at Jesus' baptism when he began his ministry.

What would the translation of 2 Peter 1:17,18,21 be if these meanings of φέρω and φωνή would be used in translating these verses? The following is the NIV translation slightly revised (in italics) where necessary to reflect such a translation. We have also used a slightly more literal translation of the Greek and added some grammatical notes in order to show better how these meanings fit.

<sup>17</sup>For he received honor and glory from God the Father when *the solemn declaration with these words was conveyed* (aorist tense expressing a fact that happened) *to him* by the Majestic Glory: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased." <sup>18</sup>When we were with him on the sacred mountain, we ourselves heard this *very declaration that was conveyed* [aorist tense] from heaven . . . <sup>21</sup>For prophecy (*i.e., a divine message*) never *was conveyed* [aorist tense] by the will of man, but men spoke from God *by* (circumstantial manner participle expressing how they

spoke from God) *continually* (present tense expressing repetitive action) *conveying [prophecy]* by the Holy Spirit.

The fourth use of φέρω (φερόμαι) could be passive and so could be translated "carried along" as the NIV does. It might seem that since the first three are passive, this one should be passive also. But the change of subject from the impersonal "solemn declaration" or "prophecy" in the first three uses of φέρω to the personal "men" in the fourth instance suggests that a change to the middle voice would fit quite well (cf. the paragraph above about the use of φέρω in the middle and passive).

In the mind of this writer, the passive translation "carried along" has two weaknesses. It requires a meaning of φέρω ("carried along" in the sense of "guided") that is quite different from that which this same word had three times previously in the same context ("convey a message"). It also results in a rather vague statement about what the Holy Spirit did. We can say that the words "carried along" imply inspiration, but inspiration is more evident in a translation which says that the men who wrote Scripture conveyed a prophetic message by the agency of the Holy Spirit. In that way men can be said to be spokesmen of God. This latter translation does require the repetition of the word "prophecy" used earlier in the sentence, but that is the sense of the verse when the meaning "convey a divine message" is retained in the fourth use of φέρω in this passage.

Does translating φέρω with one consistent translation change the meaning of these verses radically? No, but it does two significant things. It strengthens Peter's contention that he and James and John were eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty (v 16) by stressing that they were present when a solemn declaration was conveyed by the Majestic Glory to the Son. It then also creates a parallel between verses 17 and 18 and verse 21. Every time the prophets spoke a divine message by the Holy Spirit they were conveying a message from God to man in a way that was as directly from God as delivery of the message on the holy mount of the Transfiguration was. In preaching on this text, one could use this picturesque parallel to help people get a little better grasp on the wonder of the miracle of the inspiration of Scripture.