

ZOPOIOS

One of the most frequently occurring adjectives in the liturgical texts is ζωοποιός particularly as an epithet of the Holy Spirit. In a number of recent translations there has been a tendency to translate this by “life-creating”, rather than “life-giving”. This is an example of unduly “etymologizing” translation. Clearly the word is made up of ζωή, “life”, and ποιεῖν “make”. It does not, though, necessarily follow that “life-making”, or “life-creating” is the most appropriate translation.

The word is found, though not commonly, in the classical language, with the meaning “creative of life”; it does not, however, occur in the NT, nor in the LXX. In both these, however, we find the corresponding verb, ζωοποιεῖν, which we must look at first.

The verb ζωοποιεῖν

Although this only occurs twelve times in the New Testament, it is arguably the principal source of the way the adjective ζωοποιός functions in the liturgical texts. The verb is transitive, and so the “object” of the ποιεῖν element is not “life”, but the person, or thing, on whom life is conferred.

The verb in the Active

John 5:21. This may be translated, “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life [ζωοποιεῖ], so too the Son gives life to those whom he wishes” [οὗς θέλει ζωοποιεῖ]. Although by itself the first clause could be rendered, “The Father raises the dead and creates life”; the second clause compels the translation I have suggested. This translation is also supported by a number of the Pauline uses.

Rom. 4:17. Here St Paul speaks of Abraham who believed in the “God who gives life to the dead” [Θεοῦ τοῦ ζωοποιούντος τοὺς νεκρούς], literally “who makes the dead live”. The use of the participle with a direct object is of importance for our enquiry.

Rom. 8:11. The use here is similar and the connection with the Spirit made explicit, “If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies [ζωοποιήσῃ τὰ θνητὰ σώματα ὑμῶν] through his Spirit which dwells in you.

1 Tim. 6:13. This is similar to Romans 4:17, “God who gives to life to all things” [Θεοῦ τοῦ ζωοποιούντος τοὺς νεκρούς], except that the object of the participle is “all things” [τὰ πάντα]. Modern critical texts on the whole prefer the reading of the majority of uncials (only Sinaiticus agrees with the Byzantine text): ζωογονούντος. There is no real difference in meaning; indeed Liddell and Scott treat the two verbs as synonymous.

The verb in the Passive

In three passages the verb is used in the passive, and in these the meaning again must be “be given life”, since the subject of ζωοποιεῖσθαι is not “life”, but that to which life is given,.

1 Cor. 15:22. “In Christ all will be given life” [πάντες ζωοποιηθήσονται]. Or, as the King James version has it, “all will be made alive”. This, of course, keeps the idea of “make”, but it destroys the links with the passages, for example those from St John, discussed above. It might be possible to translate these by “makes alive”, or even “makes alive”, but I think this is somewhat clumsy.

1 Cor. 15:36. “Fool, that which is sown is not given life [or “is not made alive”] unless it die”. This is similar to the previous example.

1 Pet. 3:18. Here the participle is used, “[Christ] given life/made alive in spirit”. The parallel is “put to death in the flesh”. I have published elsewhere my views on the idea that this is from an early Christian “hymn”.

The verb used absolutely

This leaves four passages in which the verb is used without an object, and where it could, therefore, be translated “create life”, but from what we have seen so far, the translation “give life” or “make alive” seems preferable.

Gal. 3:21. “If a law had been given which could make alive/give life” [that is “to someone” understood]. The translation “create life” is possible here, but the meaning would not be the same, and it is hard to see how a law could be said to “create life”.

The three remaining passages are the most important for our purpose, since all have the Spirit as subject, and two of them employ the present participle active of the verb, which is the nearest the NT comes to the adjective ζωοποιός.

John 6:63. “It is the spirit which gives life [ζωοποιεῖ], the flesh is of no avail” [RSV]. Again the translation “creates life” would be possible, but the emphasis is on “giving”. Jesus goes on to say that his words are “spirit and life”, and later St Peter says to Jesus “you have the words of eternal life”, which Jesus alone can give to his followers.

1 Cor. 15:45. “The first human, Adam, became a living soul; the last a life-giving spirit” [πνεῦμα ζωοποιοῦν]. Again “life-creating” is possible, but the predominant meaning is surely that Christ “makes the dead alive”, “gives life to the dead”.

2 Cor. 3:6. “The letter kills, the spirit makes alive/gives life” [πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ]. The same arguments apply.

In all these passages the stress lies on the idea that it is God, Father, Son and Spirit, who “makes the dead live”, who “gives life to the dead”; not on the undoubted fact that God also “creates life”.

These passages form the essential background for the use of the adjective ζωοποιός in the liturgical texts. In particular John 6:63 is the most likely source for the use of ζωοποιόν in the Creed. Moreover this epithet is used so frequently of the Holy Spirit because of its use in the Creed, where it is always translated “Giver of life”. I do not think it can always be translated precisely thus in liturgical texts, where it may occur in a list of epithets, but “life-giving” is at least reminiscent of the Creed. I do not think that the Creed wishes to present the Spirit as Creator, so much as Vivifier. It would be possible to use the words “Vivifier” and “vivifying” in translations of the liturgical texts, but it is somewhat archaic and not all that easy to sing. The Father is the “Maker” through the Word and the Spirit. If “life-creating” is to be our translation of ζωοποιός, then the translation of the Creed will have to be changed.

The verb also occurs in the Septuagint, but it is not necessary to discuss the few examples in detail, since the dominant influence on the liturgical texts is that of the NT.

From what has been said it seems clear that the most appropriate translation of ζωοποιός in the liturgical texts is “life-giving” rather than “life-creating”. It might be urged that this raises problems for the translation of the other group of words based on the compounds of ζωή and δίδωμι. This group occurs nowhere in the New Testament, nor indeed in the Septuagint. Only the nouns ζωοδότης and ζωδοτήρ, of which the latter is uncommon in the liturgical texts, occur in non-Christian Greek. The adjectives ζωδοτικός and ζωοδότος are not, so far as I have noticed, at all common in the liturgical texts, nor, if Lampe is to any extent reliable, in the patristic sources; the former occupying two lines and the latter three, as opposed to a full column for ζωοποιός. Conversely, there is no noun ζωοποιητής. This means that from the point of view of translation, there is not likely to be any problem, since “Life-giver” or “Giver of life” can be used for the *nomina agentis*, and “life-giving” for the very common adjective ζωοποιός. The main lexical point also needs to be stressed: it is not the same to say that the Spirit “creates life” and that he “gives life”, or “makes alive”, particularly since the idea is very frequent in connection with “restoring to life”, “making what was dead alive again”. “Life-giving” is not a weaker epithet than “life-creating”, but one which has its own distinct and different meaning.

In passing, it is worth pointing out that Ζωοδόχος does not mean “life-giving” but “life-receiving”. The word is used of the Mother of God and also of her tomb and of Christ’s. The famous Spring connected with the Mother of God in Constantinople is also “Life-receiving”. Of course, like the Mother of God herself, it gives life, but only because it has first received it. The relationship between ζωοδόχος and ζωοτόκος is exactly parallel to that between θεοδόχος and θεοτόκος. The latter pair are not simply interchangeable, as Nestorios realised.