

THE TRANSLATION OF Ο ΠΡΟΑΓΩΝ IN 2 JOHN 9

Terry Griffith
(terry@tgriffith.plus.com)

Summary

A little known Old Latin variant of 2 John 9 ('qui recedit' for ὁ προάγων) provides an interpretive clue that has been overlooked in the translation and exegesis of this verse. After a survey of modern translations (which tend to over-interpret this verb) and a look at ancient variants, new lexical evidence is adduced to show how ὁ προάγων functions in the Elder's statement. Finally, a more neutral translation is offered: 'Anyone who goes forth [or leaves] and who does not remain in the teaching of the Messiah does not possess God.'

1. Introduction

The first half of 2 John 9, πᾶς ὁ προάγων καὶ μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ θεὸν οὐκ ἔχει, looks straightforward enough but the verb προάγειν has presented peculiar difficulties for copyists, translators and commentators alike. Its basic meaning is 'to lead forward' or 'to go ahead', although it has a much wider semantic range according to context.¹ Few, however, choose to translate the participial phrase πᾶς ὁ προάγων in this basic sense in this context.² Many offer a more

¹ Something of the breadth of meaning of this verb is illustrated by its 14 occurrences in the LXX and 19 other occurrences in the NT: 'come/go forth/forward' (1 Kgs 17:16 (A); 1 Macc. 10:77; 2 Macc. 5:18; 10:27; 11:10 (A); 3 Macc. 3:16); 'precede/go ahead (spatially or temporally)' (Jdt. 10:22; Matt 2:9; 14:22; 21:9, 31; 26:32; 28:7 and Markan parallels; Luke 18:39; 1 Tim. 1:18; 5:24; Heb. 7:18); 'promote' (Esth. 2:21; Prov. 6:8; Sir. 20:27); 'guide/lead' (Prov. 4:27; Wis. 19:11; Sir. prol 12; 2 Macc. 10:1) 'bring forward/out/before' (Acts 12:6; 16:30; 17:5; 25:26).

² Judith Lieu translates it as 'he who leads forward' in J. Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John: History and Background*, SNTW (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986),

interpretive translation choice such as ‘Everyone who innovates’;³ ‘Anyone who is so “progressive”’;⁴ ‘Anyone who runs ahead’;⁵ ‘Anyone going beyond’;⁶ ‘going too far’;⁷ and ‘all those advancing’.⁸

The assumption behind many, if not all, of these translations is that those being referred to have taken a christological position that is more progressive or more advanced than that expressed by the Elder in verse 7: ‘Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world’ (TNIV).⁹ The more ‘progressive’ position alluded to is usually interpreted along the lines of a denigration of Christ’s humanity, and of the salvific value of his death, in favour of a more exalted understanding of Christ. 2 John 9 is thus used as further evidence for identifying the Johannine opponents as those promoting gnosticising or docetic-type ideas concerning Jesus.

The problem with this approach, however, is that *πρόαγειν* when used absolutely (without a stated direct or indirect object, or sphere in which the action is said to take place) never takes the meaning of ‘being advanced/progressive’. Rather, when used in the metaphorical sense of ‘excel’ or ‘make progress’, it requires an accompanying noun to provide the sphere of excellence or progress.¹⁰ The verb that usually expresses the idea of making progress is *προκόπτειν* and this is

91; and ‘everyone who goes ahead’ in J. M. Lieu, *I, II and III John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 257.

³ R. W. Yarborough, *1-3 John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 349. Yarborough offers a short excursus (354-56) which suggests applications of the principle of innovation which he understands as ‘presenting something different, faithlessly novel, and supplanting what was former, established, and valid’ (350).

⁴ R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30 (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 645.

⁵ G. M. Burge, *Letters of John*, NIV Application Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 228; Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 212. See also the TNIV.

⁶ J. Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, SP 18 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 349. See also the REB, NRSV and GNB.

⁷ M. M. Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2004), 150.

⁸ B. Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Volume 1: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 564. See also the ESV.

⁹ The use of the present participle *ἐρχομένον* here in place of the perfect participle *ἔληλυθότα* in the parallel confession found in 1 John 4:2 does not represent any real difference, since both tense forms are imperfective in aspect, with the perfect being an enhanced version of the present. See M. D. Jensen, ‘Jesus “Coming” in the Flesh: 2 John 7 and Verbal Aspect’, *NovT* 56 (2014), 310-22.

¹⁰ See Lieu, *Epistles*, 92n108. E.g., ‘making great advances (*πρόαγει*) in violence and cruelty’ (Demosthenes, *De Corona* 181).

precisely what we find in 2 Timothy 3:13: ‘advancing (προκόψουσιν) to the worse, deceiving and being deceived’ (also 2 Tim. 2:16; Gal. 1:14).¹¹ In fact, in gnostic literature it is προκόπτειν and προκοπή (as Coptic loan words) that are used to express the concept of progress.¹² Furthermore, we know that in gnostic contexts the verb προάγειν is used as a technical term meaning ‘to emanate’, referring to the various emanations of the deity in gnostic thought.¹³ It is difficult, therefore, to see how this verb in 2 John 9 really works in the ‘progressive’ contexts envisaged by those who over-interpret it in this way.

This short paper attempts to show that this verb may be used to describe a proceeding from a given position which far from assuming a ‘progressive’ outlook could equally describe a ‘regressive’ movement. It specifically aims to counter the view expressed by David Rensberger that the opponents in the Johannine Letters cannot be Christians returning to Judaism (by denying the messiahship of Jesus) because the ‘opponents are accused of going forward, not backward (2 John 9)’.¹⁴ Of course, the minority ‘messianic’ understanding might be equally tendentious depending as it does on a differing interpretation of the confessional material in the Johannine Epistles. The point I wish to make, however, is that προάγειν makes no contribution to determining the christological content of the ‘teaching of [the] Christ/Messiah’ in the following clause.

2. Ancient Translation Choices

The difficulty of the choice of ὁ προάγων was felt by some copyists, and the Majority Text substitutes ὁ παραβαίνων which finds its way

¹¹ See Spicq, ‘προκοπή, προκόπτω’, *TLNT* 3:185-88 for a useful discussion of this term.

¹² See Nag Hammadi II 63,16; VI 54, 7, 14; XI 16, 32 which are discussed in Lieu, *Epistles*, 92nn110-11.

¹³ See Hippolytus, *Elenchus* VI.18.6, and Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 33.3; 41.2, 4.

¹⁴ David Rensberger, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*, ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 81. Similarly, Colin Kruse comments on 2 John 9 that this ‘letter stands as a warning against embracing avant-garde teaching simply because it is novel’ (Kruse, *Letters*, 212). In Terry Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols: A New Look at 1 John*, JSNTSup 233 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 149-91, I argue that the use of the christological confessions in 1 John should be interpreted as expressing the fundamental beliefs of Johannine Christians in the *messiahship* of Jesus.

into the AV as ‘whoever transgresseth’.¹⁵ Now the verb *προάγειν*, when used transitively, can have the meaning of ‘to seduce/mislead/induce’ and this might have been viewed as corresponding to the intransitive use of *παραβαίνειν* meaning ‘to turn aside’ or ‘to deviate from the path’.¹⁶ This would then fit well with the earlier description in 2 John 7 of such people as ‘deceivers’ (*πλάνοι*). Furthermore, the variant *παραβαίνων* may also be recognised as an attempt by some copyists to interpret the difficult original by using a verb that can mean ‘to go beyond’ both literally and metaphorically.¹⁷ For example, when used with the concept of the law it takes the meaning of going beyond the bounds of the law and thus to transgress the law. Thus, in the Majority Text reading of 2 John 9, the teaching of and about the Christ is seen as that which is transgressed (although the concept is best suited to moral rather than doctrinal formulations).¹⁸ Clearly, the pejorative connotation of *παραβαίνων* had its attractions over the more positive sounding *προάγων*. Judith Lieu notes one interesting text in 3 Corinthians 3:36-39 which combines both ideas in a context where traditional christological teaching has also been challenged: ‘If anyone transgresses (*παραβένει*) these things, the fire is with him and with those who travel ahead (*προοδοιποροῦντων*) in this manner’ (verse 37).¹⁹ However, against all such lines of reasoning, we have an intransitive use of *προάγων* in 2 John 9.

There is also an Old Latin (OL) reading that is very rarely noted.²⁰ It is found in some OL versions of 2 John 9 which read *qui recedit* (‘he who departs/draws back from’) for the Vulgate’s *qui praecedit* (‘he

¹⁵ This reading also lies behind the Syriac versions.

¹⁶ For example Ezek. 17:15-16; 1 Clem. 53.2.

¹⁷ No example was found where *προάγειν* takes the sense of going *beyond* or *too far*.

¹⁸ Scholars debate whether the genitive is objective (doctrinal teaching about Christ), or subjective (moral teaching that comes from Christ), or both. The Johannine Epistles are replete with evidence that supports all three views (1 John 3:23 combines both aspects under the rubric of a single command), although I favour an objective genitive here.

¹⁹ *LSJ* gives the meaning to go ‘too far’ only for the passive of *προοδοιπορέω*. Lieu does not regard the linguistic and conceptual parallels as evidence for dependence upon 2 John (Lieu, *Epistles*, 98). Also, she refers to this text in the context of discussing 2 John 10-11 and does not explore its relevance (if any) for the idea of ‘going ahead’ in 2 John 9.

²⁰ The OL variant is discussed by Lieu (*Epistles*, 34) although in the comments on the text of 2 John 9 (*Epistles*, 91-95) and in her more recent commentary (*Commentary*, 257-58) she omits any reference to it. The only commentary published since 1900 that I have found that notes this OL variant is A.E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), 178, 221.

who goes ahead / leads forward’).²¹ The most important source for this OL reading is the fourth century Latin writer Lucifer of Calaris, the value of whose works lies in his extensive quotation of Scripture rather than his theological acumen.²² He wrote in the context of the Arian controversies, and the doctrinal content of the Johannine writings on the equality of the Son with the Father provided him with suitable material. This variant comes as a surprise given that it apparently reverses the meaning of ὁ προάγων. Brooke uses the OL evidence in general to confirm the view that ‘the tendency to add interpretative and explanatory glosses to the text of the Epistle is both widespread and dates back to early times’.²³ It seems, at least as far as Lucifer is concerned, that Arianism is best described as a regressive and defective doctrinal position, which diminishes the person of Christ, and he offers a pejorative translation of 2 John 9 to make the point.

3. New Lexical Evidence

We must now ask whether translating the verb in the more natural and neutral sense of ‘going forth’ better reflects its meaning in the context of 2 John 9 taken as a whole. It is evident that what must not be neglected in determining the sense of ὁ προάγων is the following participial clause, καὶ μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (‘and who does not remain within the teaching of [the] Christ/Messiah’). Such a person ‘does not have God’ (θεὸν οὐκ ἔχει). The verb μένειν is then repeated, this time positively, in the following ‘whoever remains (ὁ μένων) in the teaching has both the Father and the Son’. Judith Lieu

²¹ The OL variant is noted in the critical apparatus of the *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 5th ed., ed. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), which cites Codex Sangermanensis (beginning of the tenth century) and Codex Legionensis (palimpsest, mid-seventh century). The critical apparatus in the NA²⁷ text does not note its existence.

²² For the text of *De non conveniendo cum haereticis*, see G.F. Diercks, ed., *Luciferi Calaritanus Opera Quae Supersunt*, CCSL 8 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1978), 188-89. Lucifer wrote this work during his exile in 355-62 CE. The same reading occurs in Didymus of Alexandria, which can be found in F. Zoepfl, *Didymi Alexandrini in Epistolas Canonicas Brevis Enarratio*, NTAbh 4/1 (Munster: Aschendorff, 1914), 84. According to Cassiodorus (*De institutione divinarum litterarum* 8), this work is a translation by Epiphanius of Didymus’s commentary. Other later OL witnesses are listed in the critical apparatus of W. Thiele, ed., *Epistulae Catholicae*, VL 26/1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1956-69), 389-91.

²³ Brooke, *Epistles*, 198. He is referring here to 1 John but it is applicable to 2 John also.

notes that ‘it is not the going forward that is at fault so much as the failure to remain; although perhaps the author would have thought that the latter was the inevitable consequence of the former, it is the remaining that he intends to highlight’.²⁴ The idea of ‘going forth’ or ‘proceeding’ in 2 John 9 is thus given a negative import because it represents the failure to remain in the teaching of [the] Christ/Messiah. It need not reflect, therefore, either on the part of those who have left or those who remained, a value judgment of ‘progressiveness’. Indeed, there is some evidence that the *προάγειν* may be used in contexts describing a retreat or return.²⁵ The following examples support this somewhat counterintuitive claim.

Diodorus Siculus describes a campaign by Ptolemy in which, starting out from Egypt, he captures Gaza, Joppa, and Acre and rests his army in Coele Syria after defeating Demetrius, son of Antigonus, in battle. In the subsequent course of events, Demetrius regroups and is joined by Antigonus and his army in Upper Syria. He then says: ‘Ptolemy, however, on hearing of the arrival of Antigonus, called together his leaders and friends and took counsel with them whether it was better to remain (*μένειν*) and reach a final decision in Syria or to withdraw to (*προάγειν εἰς*) Egypt and carry on the war from there as he had formerly done against Perdiccas. ... Deciding, therefore to leave Syria he ... returned into (*ἐπανήλθεν εἰς*) Egypt.’²⁶ This is a particularly interesting example in that not only does *προάγειν* occur with *μένειν* (as in 2 John 9), but is also parallel with *ἐπανήλθεν*. What is described here can hardly be called an ‘advance’. The wider context establishes that the direction of travel is a return to where they came from.

In a further example Polybius tells of how the Celtic army under Aneroestes had invaded Etruria and was approaching Rome before being intercepted by Lucius Aemilius. ‘The leaders of the Gauls ... held a council at which the King Aneroestes expressed the opinion, that having captured so much booty ..., they should not give battle again nor risk the fortune of the whole enterprise, but return (*ἐπανάγειν*) home in safety. ... It was decided under the circumstances to take the

²⁴ Lieu, *Commentary*, 258.

²⁵ In military contexts it is nearly always used in the positive sense of troops advancing.

²⁶ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 19.93.5-7. All classical translations are taken from the Loeb edition.

course recommended by Anerostes, and ... they broke up their camp before daybreak and retreated (προῆγον) along the sea-coast through Etruria.²⁷ Again, the ‘going forward’ is explained as a returning back.

Similarly, Polybius recounts how King Philip sets out from Corinth and at Tegea settles a problem after a council with the Lacedemonians. He then writes: ‘He himself broke up his camp and began to march back (προῆγε) to Corinth, having in his decision about the Spartans given the allies an excellent specimen of the policy he meant to pursue.’²⁸ In these examples, the context alone determines whether the movement is viewed as a negative or positive outcome, but the verb hardly means ‘advance’ and is probably better translated as ‘proceed’.

4. Conclusion

Whatever the uncertainty surrounding the meaning of προάγων in 2 John 9, it is clear that the controlling concept in the verse is provided by the second verb ‘does not *continue* in the teaching of (the) Christ/Messiah (μη μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ)’. The verb μένειν is very common in the Johannine writings and it bears the sense of ‘remaining in’ or of ‘close adherence to’, and is used, for example, with respect to the word or message of Jesus in John 8:31 and 15:7. Its use in 2 John 9 thus engenders an image of a group whose identity and boundaries are defined by what it believes. The opposite of remaining in the teaching of Christ would then be to go outside the boundaries of the group that were defined by the Johannine confession.²⁹ A person deemed guilty of ‘going outside’ seems thus to be described by the Elder as ὁ προάγων.³⁰ It is simply a matter of expressing an ‘in/out’ distinction where the participle is describing the person who leaves a well-defined group or setting.

This ‘in/out’ imagery using the same verbs is also found in Polybius: ‘In Rome, no one was likely to look next day for Demetrius or those who left with him (τοὺς μετ’ ἐκείνου προάγοντας). For those who remained (οἱ ... μένοντες) on the spot, supposed he had started for

²⁷ Polybius, *Histories* 2.26.4-7.

²⁸ Polybius, *Hist.* 4.24.9.

²⁹ As in John 15:6: ‘If you do not remain in me (μένει ἐν ἐμοί), you are like a branch that is thrown away (ἐβλήθη ἔξω).’

³⁰ This sense would make ὁ προάγων roughly synonymous with ἐξῆλθαν in 1 John 2:19 where both occur in antithesis to μένειν.

Cerceii, and those in Anagneia were going to meet him at the same spot, supposing he would come there. The consequence was that his escape was entirely unnoticed.³¹ In another example, Diodorus Siculus describes the lamentation of some of the inhabitants of Syracuse for those being exiled by the city authorities, ‘who were being driven from hearth and ancestral gods, who could neither remain nor yet go outside the walls (οὐτε μένειν ἐξῆς οὐτ’ ἐκτὸς τῶν τειχῶν προάγειν) since the barbarians were besieging the city’.³²

It is the context of these examples adduced here, especially those that also make use of the verb μένειν, that produces the counterintuitive sense of ‘going back’ or ‘returning’ or ‘leaving’ for προάγειν. The imagery suggested by the phrase ‘not remaining in the teaching of Christ/the Messiah’, together with the description of the deceivers going out into the world in 2 John 7, suggests that what is being censured here is simply a departure from the Elder’s teaching about the Christ/Messiah (whether that represents a complex reinterpretation or a simple abandonment of the confession of faith expressed in 2 John 7) and consequent exclusion from Johannine Christianity.

There may therefore be an interpretive rationale behind the choice of the OL *qui recedit* in 2 John 9 for ὁ προάγων which could be useful in acting as a brake on progressive interpretations running away with themselves. It cautions against making this verb bear the sense of ‘progress’ as a description of those holding to gnosticising or docetic trajectories of development of the teaching about the Christ. The evidence of the variant ὁ παραβαίνων, in this regard, is also useful in a negative way because it demonstrates that while some copyists were puzzled by προάγων, they chose not to interpret it in the sense of ‘to be progressive’ which would require a form of the verb προκόπτειν. 2 John 9a is thus best translated in a more neutral way as ‘Anyone who goes forth [or leaves] and who does not remain in the teaching of the Messiah does not possess God.’³³

³¹ Polybius, *Hist.* 31.15.1-2.

³² Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 20.15.5. When προάγειν occurs with ἐκ or ἐκτός it takes the sense of ‘to leave’.

³³ Daniel Streett translates ‘going forth’ in Daniel R. Streett, *They Went Out From Us’: The Identity of the Opponents in First John*, BZNW 177 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 353. Streett’s monograph is an extended argument in favour of understanding the christological issue at stake in the Johannine Epistles as the denial of the messiahship of Jesus.