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Luke 2:14—Peace on Earth for Whom?

Luke 2:14 reports the song that the angels sang to shepherds on the night of Jesus’s birth. The words have been translated differently in various versions of the Bible—possibly none of which is accurate.

King James Version	New Revised Standard Version	New International Version	English Standard Version
“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”	“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”	“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”	“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”

The KJV translation was based on a Greek manuscript that no longer commands much respect among scholars: the word translated “good will” was a Greek noun (*eudokia*). Thus there is a wish for people to receive two things—peace and good will.

Older and better manuscripts use a Greek adjective (*eudokias*) instead of the noun. Virtually all modern translations recognize this and take the adjective as modifying the word for “people” (translated “men” in the KJV).

Then there is a wish for people to receive only one thing (peace) but the people who will receive this blessing are described by the adjective *eudokias* as “pleasing to God.”

Even so, there would be two possible ways to understand the adjective *eudokias*. Just like English adjectives, it could serve (1) to limit or specify *which* people the angels hope will receive peace on earth, or (2) to indicate *why* the angels expect people to receive peace on earth.

Put simply, a literal translation of the verse would be either

1. “Glory to God in the highest (heaven), and on earth peace among people with whom God is pleased,” or
2. “Glory to God in the highest (heaven), and on earth peace among people, with whom God is pleased.”

In the first instance, the angels do not wish for there to be peace on earth among all people—the blessing is for only the people with whom God is pleased. Notably, this is the sense in which modern English translations interpret the angels’ song (including the NRSV, NIV, and ESV cited above).

In the second instance, the angels do wish for there to be peace on earth among all people—and the stated reason for this is because people are pleasing to God. This sense would reiterate God’s affirmation of humanity at creation (Gen. 1:31). It would also seem to fit well with a motif of Luke-Acts, what is sometimes called “Lukan generosity.”

A better translation of Luke 2:14 is used in the liturgies of many churches (though not found in any edition of the Bible): “Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth.”

The advantage of this rendering is simple: like the Greek, it is ambiguous and could be taken in either of two senses: Does the church wish for there to be peace for all people, since all people are “God’s people”? Or does the church wish for there to be peace only among those people who are rightly considered to be “God’s people”?