

RED AND GREEN HORSES?

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Introduction

There are four places in the Bible where horses are described in terms of their colours. These are Zech 1.8 and 6.2-3, 6-7, and Rev 6.2-8 and 19.11, 14. Some of the terms chosen for these colours in English Bibles can be rather misleading, and because English Bibles are so often referred to by translators in other projects, they may become a source of confusion in other languages also. This article discusses the Hebrew and Greek terms used and suggests ways of dealing with the most troublesome ones. The basic problem arises because different languages divide up the spectrum in different ways, so that words that at first sight seem to be equivalent may turn out not to be when examined in context.

Zechariah 1.8

In this verse there are three different colours mentioned. The Hebrew words are *'adom*, *saroq*, and *laban*. The first word, *'adom*, is rendered as *purros* in the ancient Greek Septuagint, and is usually translated “red” in English, but the problem is that without further qualification this word brings to mind a bright red like the colour of blood, and no horse is that colour. So if we use the word “red” in English, it makes the horse seem unreal, and there is nothing in the description of the other horses that suggests anything abnormal about their colours. In other contexts in the Old Testament, the word *'adom* is used of stew (Gen 25.30), of a young cow (Num 19.32), of water reflecting early morning sun so that it appeared red as blood (2 Kgs 3.22), of a man’s complexion (Song 5.10), and of clothing stained by treading grapes (Isa 63.2). This variety demonstrates that it covers a wide area of the spectrum from a bright orange-red (2 Kgs 3.22) to brown (Gen 25.30) or purple (Isa 63.2). So in the context of a horse, the simple word “red” in English is definitely not adequate. English has several technical terms for horses of a reddish-brown colour, namely “bay,” “chestnut,” “roan,” and “sorrel.” These words could be used in translations at a high literary level, and indeed some are used in NEB/REB (“bay”), NJPSV (“bay” and “sorrel”), and Moffatt (“chestnut”), but they are not common language, and so are not suitable for a translation like GNT. The ordinary colour word used to describe horses is “brown.” This is both appropriate to the context, and well known, and so it is the term that can be recommended for English.

The second Hebrew word, *saroq*, is used elsewhere only in Isa 16.8, where it seems to refer to the branches of a vine. This does not give a clear indication of colour, but would more likely suggest the brown stems or purple grapes than something bright red. Perhaps the dappled effect of vine leaves and/or grape clusters casting shadows is intended. The Septuagint has two Greek words at this point, *psaros* and *poikilos*, though some manuscripts indicate doubt about whether *psaros* should be included or not. This word is derived from the word for a starling, and indicates the speckled kind of breast feathers that a starling has. The second word *poikilos* is a much more common word both in the Bible and in secular literature, and is used among other things to describe fawns,

cattle, birds, and even snakes. In Gen 37.3 it is used to describe Joseph's "amazing technicolor" coat. According to the classical Greek-English Lexicon of Liddell and Scott, *poikilos* (in contrast with *psaros*) indicates that the different coloured areas are clearly marked. The Latin Vulgate translation follows the Hebrew and has only one term, the same term as it uses in Zech 6.3, 6 where *poikilos* occurs in the Greek.

Some English translations like RSV use the technical term "sorrel" for this word, but this is hardly different from the meaning of the first word. GNT uses "dappled," which carries the same meaning as the ancient Greek and Latin, and is used to describe horses, but this is not a very common word. It implies especially various shades of grey, and so the term "grey" is probably the best word to use in English. It is readily applied to horses, and is also simple, clear, and well known.

The last Hebrew word, *laban*, means "white." It is quite common in the Old Testament, and is generally not difficult to translate. In the Septuagint, the Greek word is *leukos*.

Zechariah 6.2-3, 6-7

In these verses there are four different colour words, two of them the same as those used in Zech 1.8. The words are *'adom*, *shakhor*, *laban*, and *barod*. The first and third words we have already discussed. The second word, *shakhor*, means "black," and like "white," is not usually difficult to translate. It is used elsewhere for instance in Song 5.11 to describe a man's hair as black as a raven. The equivalent term in the Septuagint is *melas*.

The last word, *barod*, presents more of a problem. It is used elsewhere only in Gen 31.10 and 12, where it describes the colour of certain goats. The meaning there is not entirely clear, but the word may be related to a similar word that means "hail." If so, then it could suggest the speckled appearance of the ground after hail has fallen. GNT again uses the word "dappled" as in 1.8. In doing so it is following the example of the ancient Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate translations, which both used the same term for *barod* here as they had used for *saroq* in 1.8. Since there is no identifiable distinction between the two Hebrew words, we suggest that "grey" may again be the best simple term to use in English.

There is a fifth word in the Hebrew text in Zech 6.3, 7, which occurs only in these two places. The word is *'amutsim*, and it is not clear whether it is a colour term or not. There are no other contexts of use to give any guidance, and the uncertainty about the meaning goes back to ancient times. The Septuagint takes *'amutsim* as a further colour term, and translates in both places with the word *psaros* that means much the same as "dappled." The Vulgate however takes it to be related to a similar word that occurs in Zech 12.5, and to mean something like "strong," so gives it this sense in both verses. On the whole it seems more probable that this is not a colour word, so we do not recommend translating as if it were. The meaning "strong" fits the context both times, and has ancient support, so this is probably the best term. There is further discussion in the *Handbook on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, 162 and 165.

Revelation 6.2-8 and 19.11, 14

The Greek words used in these verses are *leukos* (6.2; 19.11, 14), *purros* (6.4), *melas* (6.5), and (6.8). The first word, *leukos*, means "white," and the third word, *melas*,

means “black,” and as with the equivalent Hebrew terms, neither is normally difficult to translate. As noted above, the Septuagint used *leukos* in Zech 1.8; 6.3, 6 for the Hebrew *laban*, and *melas* in Zech 6.2, 6 for the Hebrew *shakhor*, so that there is here in Revelation an echo of the Zechariah passages. The Septuagint also used *purros* in Zech 1.8; 6.2 for the Hebrew *'adom*, and this gives the same translation problems as *'adom* did. The Greek word *purros* is derived from a word meaning “fire,” and conveys the idea of a yellowish red. It is used in classical Greek of such things as the yolk of an egg, human hair, and the mane of a lion. I have not been able to trace any examples of it being used of horses outside the Bible, so it may be that the use of *purros* in the Septuagint in Zech 1.8; 6.2 was as unnatural in Greek as “red” is in English. If so, then the question arises whether translators should use the English word that is also unnatural. Although there was no reason to do this in Zechariah, one could argue that it would be more appropriate in Revelation. However, I believe that since the other horses in Rev 6.2, 5 are described with normal horse colours, it would be better to translate *purros* by “brown” as in Zechariah. This would also maintain the link between the two passages.

The real problem is the word *chlōros* in Rev 6.8. Its basic meaning is “green,” and it is used to describe grass in Mark 6.39 and also in Rev 8.7. It is also used to describe vegetation in general in Rev 9.4. Does this mean that in Rev 6.8, we have a green horse? The absurdity of this has been recognised by translations from the Vulgate onwards. There the translation is *pallidus*, which means “pale.” The Greek word *chlōros* can carry this meaning in some contexts, though it does not occur in this sense anywhere else in the New Testament. This is, however, the sense that came into the King James Bible in English (“a pale horse”), and has been remarkably persistent. The problem is that this appears to be describing the horse’s health rather than its colour, and to be saying that the horse is not feeling very well. This is ridiculous enough, but some more recent English versions have translated as “pale green” (NRSV, CEV), which if anything sounds even more absurd.

Why has this word proved such a problem to translators? I suspect that it is because they have failed to grasp the simple fact mentioned at the beginning of this article that different languages divide up the spectrum differently. Thus a word whose central meaning is “green (like grass)” may also cover parts of the spectrum described by other words in other languages. In classical Greek, *chlōros* is used of such things as honey and egg yolk, which would never be called “green” in English (unless perhaps the egg were bad!). Horses are certainly not the same colour as egg yolk, but *chlōros* is also, and more significantly for our purposes, used to describe a mist: for this the natural colour term in English would be “grey.” We may therefore suggest that the part of the spectrum covered by *chlōros* in Greek includes what we would call “grey” in English. This would not only be clear and natural, but would also strengthen the echo of the colours of the horses in Zechariah.

In a recent conversation with a friend who is a native speaker of Welsh, I was interested to learn that Welsh divides up the spectrum in a way similar to that which I am supposing for Greek. My friend later wrote to me as follows: “The ‘pale horse’ in Rev 6.8 is described by the word *glas* (also meaning ‘blue’ in Welsh) in my older Bible, but interestingly by *llwyd* in a newer version. On reflection *llwyd* was the word I would have used in my boyhood for ‘grey,’ not *glas*. For example, my Sunday-best suit would have been *llwyd*.” It seems that the old Welsh translation first published in 1588, earlier than is

than the King James in English, had a more realistic approach to the colour of the horse in Rev 6.8 than most English versions. And so does the newer Welsh version.

In recent years I have also worked with two NT projects in southern Siberia—Khakas and Tuvín—where the people are interested in horses, and very familiar with them. It was an encouragement to me to study this matter further when I discovered that in both projects, the translator instinctively translated *chlōros* in Rev 6.8 by words meaning “grey.” And this happened without any prompting from me!

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to find terms in English for the horse colour terms in the Bible that are both non-technical and appropriate to the context. We have taken into account not only the Hebrew words used in Zechariah and the Greek words used in Revelation, but also the Septuagint equivalents in Zechariah. It remains only to warn translators against repeating the mistake of earlier English translators, and assuming that their own closest equivalents to the English “brown” and “grey” are appropriate words to describe horses. They should always think carefully about the way their own language divides up the colour spectrum, and choose words that are appropriate to the context of horses. Who knows, the right terms in language X may even turn out to be “red” and “green”!

For ease of reference, the original terms, the ancient translation equivalents, and the English recommendations made in this article are summarised in chart form below.

Reference	Hebrew	Greek	Recommended English term
Zech 1.8	<i>'adom</i>	<i>purros</i>	brown
	-	<i>psaros</i>	-
	<i>saroq</i>	<i>poikilos</i>	grey
	<i>laban</i>	<i>leukos</i>	white
Zech 6.2	<i>'adom</i>	<i>purros</i>	brown
	<i>shakhor</i>	<i>melas</i>	black
Zech 6.3	<i>laban</i>	<i>leukos</i>	white
	<i>barod</i>	<i>poikilos</i>	grey
	<i>'amutsim</i>	<i>psaros</i>	strong
Zech 6.6	<i>shakhor</i>	<i>melas</i>	black
	<i>laban</i>	<i>leukos</i>	white
	<i>barod</i>	<i>poikilos</i>	grey
Zech 6.7	<i>'amutsim</i>	<i>psaros</i>	strong
Rev 6.2	-	<i>leukos</i>	white
Rev 6.4	-	<i>purros</i>	brown
Rev 6.5	-	<i>melas</i>	black
Rev 6.8	-	<i>chlōros</i>	grey
Rev 19.11	-	<i>leukos</i>	white
Rev 19.14	-	<i>leukos</i>	white