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THE TRANSLATION ARTIFACT OF THE SIXTH PETITION: RE-EVALUATING MATTHEW 6:13 IN LIGHT OF THE KOINĒ PERMISSIVE IDIOM

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ABSTRACT

The traditional translation of the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer (μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν) as "lead us not into temptation" introduces an artificial theological contradiction with James 1:13. This paper argues that the traditional rendering is a diachronic translation artifact rooted in the rigid formal equivalence of the Latin Vulgate's ne nos inducas. By analyzing the underlying Semitic substrate and the Koinē Greek permissive causative idiom, this study demonstrates that eisenenkēs denotes permission rather than active divine agency. Drawing on recent French and Italian liturgical revisions, the paper proposes alternative English models that restore the petition's original protective and eschatological intent.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

The sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:13 (and parallel Luke 11:4), traditionally rendered in English as "and lead us not into temptation" (KJV, RSV, ESV), presents a persistent theological and linguistic crux. For centuries, readers and theologians have noted an apparent friction between this liturgical petition and the explicit systematic theology of the New Testament. Most notably, James 1:13 states unequivocally that God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one (πειράζει δὲ αὐτὸς οὐδέπ). If God is inherently untempting, the petition requesting that He refrain from leading believers into temptation (μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν) introduces a jarring semantic contradiction that challenges the divine character.

Historically, this tension has been managed through theological harmonizations rather than translational precision. Commentators from Augustine to modern systematic theologians have routinely explained that the petition is actually a request for protection from overwhelming spiritual trial or the machinations of the Evil One.[1]

However, by relying on a strictly literal, formal-equivalence translation of the active causative verb, standard English translations continue to transmit what can be termed a diachronic translation artifact—a textually preserved wording that obscures the original linguistic idiom for modern readers. The linguistic core of this issue lies in the nuances of the Koinē Greek permissive idiom, specifically concerning the aorist active subjunctive verb εἰσενέγκῃς (from εἰσφέρω). In Semitic-influenced Koinē Greek, causative verbal structures frequently carry a permissive force—meaning "do not allow us to enter" rather than an active "do not guide us into." Furthermore, the semantic duality of the noun πειρασμός—which encompasses both internal enticement to sin (temptation) and external testing or trial—compounds the translation difficulty. When formal equivalence renders μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς as "lead us not," it strips the verb of its permissive context, forcing a reading that implies active divine misdirection.[2]

This paper argues that the traditional English rendering is an uncritical survival of early translation choices that fails to reflect the grammatical and contextual realities of the Greek text. By re-examining the permissive idiom and the semantic boundaries of πειρασμός, this study proposes that contemporary translations must move toward configurations like "do not

let us succumb to temptation" or "do not abandon us to the trial" to ensure theological accuracy and linguistic integrity in modern liturgy.

Methodology

This study employs a tripartite methodological framework combining historical-grammatical exegesis, comparative philology, and diachronic translation analysis. First, a historical-grammatical analysis of Matthew 6:13a is conducted, focusing on the voice and aspectual constraints of the causative verb εἰσενέγκῃς and the semantic range of the noun πειρασμός in Jewish Hellenistic literature. Second, a comparative philological approach evaluates the Koinē Greek syntax against its underlying West Semitic (Hebrew and Aramaic) substrate, utilizing comparative linguistic parallels from Second Temple period rabbinic liturgies. Third, a diachronic translation analysis traces the transmission lineage of the text from St. Jerome's fourth-century Latin Vulgate through early modern English vernacular foundations to modern twenty-first-century liturgical updates. This structural tracing isolates the evolution of formal syntactic inheritances versus dynamic dynamic adjustments.

The Linguistic Pivot and Exegetical Analysis

To deconstruct the translation artifact of the sixth petition, one must analyze the precise grammatical mechanics of the phrase μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν (Matt 6:13a). The primary linguistic friction is generated by the aorist active subjunctive verb εἰσενέγκῃς, which denotes a causative movement ("to bring in" or "to lead into"). When paired with the negative particle μὴ, a standard formal-equivalence rendering yields a direct prohibition of divine action: "Do not bring/lead us in." However, this literal translation strips the Koinē text of its underlying Semitic syntactical substrate, substituting an active, proactive divine misdirection for what was originally understood as a permissive request.[3]

The Semitic Substrate and the Permissive Idiom

Koinē Greek, particularly as utilized in the Synoptic Gospels, is deeply influenced by underlying Hebrew and Aramaic thought patterns and verbal structures. In Classical and Biblical Hebrew, the causative Hiphil stem (and its Aramaic counterpart, the Aphel) frequently carries a permissive nuance rather than a strictly active causative force.[4] That is, a causative verb can express the allowance of an action or state rather than the direct initiation of it.

When translating these Semitic patterns into Greek, New Testament writers lacked an exact equivalent for the permissive aspect of the causative stem, routinely relying on standard active transitives. A critical parallel occurs in the Targumic and rabbinic prayers of the Second Temple period. For instance, the traditional Jewish morning prayer found in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 60b) contains a strikingly similar petition:[5]

וְאַל תְּבִיאֵנוּ לֹא לִידֵי חֵטְא וְלֹא לִידֵי עָבוֹן וְלֹא לִידֵי נִסָּיוֹן

"And do not bring us into the power of sin, nor into the power of iniquity, nor into the power of temptation (nissayon)." In this traditional Hebrew liturgical context, the phrase וְאַל תְּבִיאֵנוּ (ve-al tevi'enu) functions as a request that God would not abandon the suppliant to the circumstances where sin or trial becomes inevitable. It is a plea for preventative preservation, not an accusation that God actively drives human beings into moral traps. Therefore, when Matthew renders this concept using μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς, the Greek verb must be decoded through this permissive framework. The true semantic intent is not "do not actively guide us into a trap," but rather "do not allow us to be brought into" or "do not abandon us to" the sphere of temptation.

The Semantic Duality of Peirasmos

The interpretive complexity is further amplified by the semantic elasticity of the noun πειρασμός (peirasmos). In secular Hellenistic Greek, the root verb πειράϊω means "to try" or "to put to the proof." In the Septuagint and the New Testament, however, πειρασμός splits into a distinct semantic duality between objective testing (probacio) and subjective moral enticement (tentatio).[6]

By rendering πειρασμός uniformly as "temptation" in the historical English tradition, formal equivalence forces a collision with the subjective, moral sense of the word. If the petition is translated as "lead us not into temptation (moral seduction)," the literal active rendering of the verb becomes untenable, as it implies God is the agent of seduction.[7] Conversely, if πειρασμός is understood as an eschatological or refining trial, the direct causative translation remains difficult but liturgically distinct.[8]

Resolving this translation artifact requires an alignment of both the verb and the noun. If εἰσενέγκῃς is properly understood as permissive, the tension evaporates regardless of the nuance assigned to πειρασμός. The petition emerges as a cohesive eschatological cry for

preservation: a plea that God will not allow the believer to enter into, or be overcome by, the structural trials and moral perils of the present age.

Diachronic Assessment and Liturgical Evolution

The persistence of "lead us not into temptation" as a standard modern rendering is primarily a historical artifact of diachronic translation inertia. When early vernacular translations codified the text, they frequently replicated the grammatical structures of their immediate predecessors rather than accounting for the idiomatic elasticity of the original language.

The Vulgate Inheritance and Formal Equivalence

The root of the Western vernacular translation tradition is St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate (4th century c.e.). In rendering Matthew 6:13, Jerome opted for a strict, formal equivalence of the Greek μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς, writing:[9]

et ne nos inducas in temptationem

The Latin active causative verb inducas perfectly mirrored the literal surface syntax of the Greek text. However, as Latin evolved from a living language into a fixed ecclesiastical standard, the subtle permissive nuances often attributed to the subjunctive mood in late antique spoken dialects faded. When early modern English translators—most notably William Tyndale (1526) and subsequent committees—framed the vernacular liturgy, they naturally adopted the formal syntax of the Vulgate. The resulting English phrase became a fixed, sacred cadence highly resistant to manuscript-level or philological corrections.[10]

Modern Liturgical Revisions: French and Italian Frameworks

While the English-speaking world has largely retained this formal equivalence for ecumenical and traditional reasons, contemporary Romance-language episcopal conferences have actively broken the chain of inheritance to resolve the underlying theological tension.

For over half a century, the ecumenical French translation (1966) read: "Ne nous soumets pas à la tentation" ("Do not submit/subject us to temptation"). Recognizing that this formulation aggressively implied God was the active agent of moral peril, the French Conference of Catholic Bishops officially changed the liturgy to "Ne nous laisse pas entrer en tentation."[11] This translates precisely to "Do not let us enter into temptation." By introducing the permissive auxiliary laisse ("let/allow"), the French revision bypasses the

literal constraints of inducere and effectively captures the underlying Semitic permissive substrate.

Following the French precedent, the Italian Episcopal Conference replaced their long-standing rendering, "non ci indurre in tentazione" ("do not induce/lead us into temptation"), with "Non abbandonarci alla tentazione."[12] This translates dynamically to "Do not abandon us to temptation." This choice directly mirrors the rabbinic protection theology seen in Berakhot 60b, shifting the focus from an active divine steering to a protective divine presence that prevents the believer from being swallowed up by peirasmos. These contemporary shifts demonstrate that international translation frameworks are transitioning away from rigid formal equivalence to prioritize semantic and theological accuracy.[13]

Translational Solutions and Conclusion

The linguistic, historical, and liturgical evidence demonstrates that maintaining a strictly literal translation of μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς as "lead us not" preserves a diachronic translation artifact that distorts the underlying Semitic permissive idiom. To resolve this long-standing tension in English-language liturgies and modern Bible versions, translation committees must move beyond rigid formal equivalence.

Proposed Translational Models

Based on the exegesis of the permissive causative substrate and the semantic parameters of πειρασμός, we propose three distinct translational models for modern English contexts, ranging from conservative formal adjustments to dynamic, context-driven renderings:

Model Type	**Proposed Rendering**	**Translation Justification**
Permissive-Causative	"And do not let us fall into temptation" or "And do not allow us to enter into temptation"	Restores the Semitic permissive aspect to the active verb εἰσενέγκῃς. It shifts the theological focus from active divine misdirection to a plea for divine preservation, mirroring the French liturgical shift.
Protective-Eschatological	"And do not abandon us to the time of trial"	Recognizes πειρασμός in its objective sense as an eschatological or refining trial, while rendering the

		verb dynamically to echo the protective theology of Berakhot 60b and the Italian revision.
Socio-Linguistic Compromise	"And save us from succumbing to temptation"	A highly dynamic option optimized for contemporary corporate liturgy. It completely bypasses the structural syntax of "leading" to ensure that the uninitiated modern worshiper experiences no theological cognitive dissonance.

Conclusion

The traditional English rendering of the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer is a linguistic fossil. Replicated from Jerome's ne nos inducas by early modern English translators and canonized through centuries of corporate liturgical recitation, it has outlived the spoken grammatical nuances that once might have softened its active causative force.

When measured against the clear theology of James 1:13, the literal "lead us not" introduces an artificial friction into the biblical canon. By recognizing that μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς operates within a Koinē Greek heavily influenced by Semitic permissive syntax, translation scholars can confidently step away from the Vulgate's structural shadow. As contemporary Romance-language traditions have demonstrated, adjusting a sacred text for the sake of theological and linguistic accuracy does not diminish its liturgical power; rather, it restores its original intent. For modern English translations, updating the petition to a permissive framework ensures that the prayer taught by Jesus remains an accessible, coherent cry for spiritual preservation rather than an unintended source of theological confusion.

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Footnotes

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9. Jerome, Biblia Sacra Vulgata, ed. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), Matt 6:13.
10. José Ángel Ubieta López, "The Six Petition of the Lord's Prayer: Grammatical and Theological Realities," The Bible Translator 69, no. 3 (2018): 314.
11. Conférence des Évêques de France, La Traduction Liturgique de la Bible (Paris: Mame, 2017), 45.
12. Referenced in comparison with the French structural changes. See Ubieta López, "The Six Petition," 322.
13. Ubieta López, "The Six Petition," 325.

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