

NOTES

The translation of Matthew 20.4-5—an exchange of views between a translator and his Consultants

A Letter:

During our recent translation workshop, I raised with you the question of how to translate the clause in Matthew 20.4 which appears in RSV as “so they went”. Most translations take this to mean that the second group of workers in the parable went to the vineyard like the first. I proposed that it should be taken to mean “they went away”, that is to say, they did not accept the offer of the owner of the vineyard, and did not go to the vineyard. I would now like to argue more fully in favour of this interpretation.

To explain the saying “many who now are first will be last” (GNB), Jesus told this parable about workers in a vineyard. The owner needed a certain number of workers and went out early in the morning to the market place where casual labourers gathered to wait for employers to hire them. He made an agreement with some of them and sent them off to his vineyard. He came again to the market place three hours later and found a number of them still with no one to employ them. It is often assumed that he went to the market place again and again in order to hire more labourers. But this is an unwarranted assumption. It was unusual to seek agricultural labour when there remained only one working hour in the day. It was with a distinct tone of surprise that he asked those still unemployed at five o’clock in the evening why they were still standing idle wasting the whole day. He could do very well without more workers but it was his concern for the plight of the unemployed that made him ready to accommodate them all.

Our main concern, however, is whether all of them went to work in the man’s vineyard. No doubt, the first and the last group did go and work there. But what of the rest? Did they go or did they refuse to go? Matthew simply says “and they went” (*hoi de apēlthon*). In the final scene the first and the last groups were paid, but nothing is mentioned about the others, although the language used may be understood to include them all and to imply that they were all paid in reverse order.

The literal and primary meaning of the verb *aperchomai* is: “to go away, depart—with no indication of place” (Arndt & Gingrich). To make the destination clear the verb is usually used with a preposition like *pros*, *eis* or *epi* and simply means “go”, although some element of distance away from the local scene can be read. Matthew used this verb 35 times, 23 times without any preposition. In eight of these passages the destination is given or assumed to be known, but in 15 others the destination is not indicated, and is unknown. In which of the categories should we place our text—known or unknown destination? This not is written to support the latter. It is true that linguistic usage is not decisive, yet our evangelist’s fondness for the verb in its literal meaning is impressive. The labourers went elsewhere.

The first group of workers were hired for the usual full working day at the normal wages of those days. Three hours later, the owner went to the market place and found some of the labourers still there with no employer coming to hire them. He told them to work in his vineyard also promising to pay them a fair wage. These men could no longer expect a full day’s wage, but probably expected

to get somewhat more in proportion to the number of hours they put in. As usual in the orient in such circumstances, bargaining took place to avoid unpleasantness at the end of the day.

Unlike today, casual labourers were absolutely at the mercy of the employers. Among the Jews the situation might have been better, but it is clear that these men were anxious to know definitely beforehand how much they would be paid. They were promised a fair wage, but what seemed fair to the employers and to the employees could be quite different. Apparently they felt this promise was too vague and did not go to the vineyard but went elsewhere. The same thing happened at twelve and three o'clock.

At five o'clock the owner went out again to the market place and saw some unemployed men there still ready to work. We should not read too much into the text but it would be fair to assume that these men had also turned up early in the morning but the owner missed meeting them earlier. He was surprised and was greatly concerned about their plight. From his tone these men probably thought, "Here is a man who cares whether we get employment or not. Let us go, it is better to take home something rather than go home empty handed." And so they went to the vineyard without bargaining about their wages but trusting that such a man would treat them justly.

In the concluding scene the owner instructed his steward to pay the labourers their wages—"starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first" (GNB). Verse 8 is translated in RSV as "beginning from the last, up to the first". In many cases it would be more natural to render them "former and latter". [When the evil spirit returns, (Mt 12.44) "the latter state of the man becomes worse than the former" would be a natural translation. In 1 Cor 15.45 the translation "the first Adam" is natural because Adam is considered as the first man, but referring to Christ as "the last Adam" is rather awkward; "the latter Adam" would sound more natural.] However, the assumption that all went to work in the vineyard stems from the understanding of the conjunction *heōs*. This is often translated "till, until, up to"; but to translate all cases with these words can lead to misunderstanding. [Psalm 110.1 and the quotations of it in the NT are regularly rendered, "Sit at my right side until I put your enemies under your feet". The immediate impression such a rendering leaves on the mind is that as long as the subduing process of the enemies goes on, he might continue to sit there, but no further. Jerusalem Bible is certainly right in translating Heb 1.13, "Sit at my right side and I will make your enemies . . ."] GNB translators were aware of this problem in verse 8 and appear to try to say that all the labourers should not be assumed to have worked and to be paid. In such passages as Mt 22.25 the context makes it clearer that it should be understood as a series but this is not necessarily so in our text.

With the exception of AV, all translators in English and Indian languages assumed that all the workers went to the vineyard. AV renders "and they went their way" indicating that they went elsewhere.

As for the meaning of the parable, whatever Jesus may have tried to emphasise, our evangelist makes it quite clear that it has to be understood in connection with the incident before it. A rich young man, evidently highly

favoured by God in the popular mind, came to Jesus but went away sad because he could not accept Jesus' invitation. Jesus commented that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom he came to establish. The disciples were astounded, and in despair Peter asked what would be the point of their leaving their homes to follow him. Jesus assured them they would surely get their reward a hundred-fold. Then Peter, becoming unduly confident of his reward, had to be corrected and hence the saying. Matthew then tells the parable and is careful to preface and conclude it with the saying in reverse order.

The parable is usually understood as a warning against applying earthly standards in judging such matters. We think of reward and punishment in proportionate terms and from OT teaching we can claim that we are justified for doing so. But reward in the world to come depends entirely upon God's grace, not upon the quantity of service rendered. There will be no distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles in the service to which God now calls us.

Had all the labourers gone to the vineyard it would be a simple matter to rephrase verse 4 as "at twelve o'clock and again at three o'clock and also at about five o'clock" and the meaning of the parable would remain the same. When the man went out at 5 o'clock he did not expect to find any more labourers without employment. He was surprised. Our evangelist is surely trying to tell us the man did not go out in order to hire more labourers.

Further, there is another important level to the meaning of the parable. While reward depends upon God's grace the element of faith is no less important. If our interpretation is right it would also bring out God's concern for the plight of his people. It is a mystifying fact that some accept the invitation of the Gospel while others do not. The tragedy of the rich young man was his inability to trust completely in God's grace. The workers called at the third, sixth and ninth hours did not have sufficient confidence in the goodness and integrity of the owner.

Jesus emphasised the importance of faith again and again throughout his preaching ministry. Paul stated this formally: "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph 2.8). The prostitutes and the tax collectors were going into the Kingdom of God ahead of the Jewish leaders because they believed in John's preaching (Mt 21.31).

Childless parents adopt orphaned infants and love them as much as other parents love their own children. Why do we love our children? Because they cannot do without us. It is this condition of complete dependence on God's grace that Jesus always insisted upon.

Without any change to the meaning of the parable, our proposed translation would then bring into focus more properly the importance of faith. Like Peter and others, the rich young man would have received more than a hundredfold had he taken the plunge. The workers who refused the invitation would not have been disappointed.

Taking all these points into consideration, the evangelist's use of the connecting particle *de* instead of the simple *kai* becomes significant. So verse 4 is best translated "but they went away".

The reply:

Thank you for your interesting letter in which you propose an unusual interpretation of Matthew 20.4 (This reference is correct for AV, RSV and NEB, but the sentence in question occurs in verse 5 in the UBS Greek text, GNB, and most other modern English versions). As you know we were not convinced by your views when you first mentioned them. Now that you have set them out in more detail, we would like to make some more comments.

First we will make general comments and then some more detailed ones. To begin with, we notice that in order to support your argument, you have to make a number of assumptions for which we can see no support in the text. For instance, you assume that the men offered work at 9 o'clock bargained with the owner, and rejected his terms. Then again, you assume the men hired at five o'clock had been in the market-place all day, and that they drew conclusions from the owner's tone of voice. We do not see that the text itself confirms these ideas.

Another general comment is that we believe you are seeing more in the parable than it really contains. The comments you make about faith are certainly in harmony with the total teaching of the NT, but this particular aspect of it does not arise naturally from the present context. The parable is linked to the disciples' questions in 19.25–27 much more closely than to the reaction of the rich young man in 19.16–22. And even in the story of the rich young man, faith is not mentioned. Most parables have only one main point; and in this one, the main point is to illustrate the epigram about the last being first and the first last; you yourself have correctly drawn attention to this.

Our third general comment is that if the men offered work at 9 o'clock, 12 o'clock and 3 o'clock did not go to the vineyard, why should they be mentioned at all? They simply complicate the story for no purpose. In consequence, they force you to complicate your interpretation in order to explain why they are mentioned. This is one of our main reasons for not accepting your proposal.

We would now move on to some more specific matters. You state that an expression like "first and last usually excludes the in-betweens". This may be true in your own language, but it is not the case in English: and we do not think it is the case in Greek either. In English at least, the opposite would more often be true, that the in-betweens would be included. To us, this is what GNB implies in verse 8. Perhaps we are influenced by our knowledge of English, but we believe this is also true for Greek.

Another point is the meaning of the AV rendering "and they went their way". This could be taken in the sense in which you took it, but it does not have to be. On its own, it is rather ambiguous, but we would suggest that in this context the AV translators did not intend the phrase in the sense in which you have taken it, because then it would clash with verse 3. The men were not on their way anywhere; they were standing around with nothing to do. To say "they went their way" must surely mean that they accepted the owner's offer, and went on the way he told them to go, namely to the vineyard.

Now we come to the comments on the Greek text. The verb *aperchomai* is used 35 times in Matthew (though in one case, at 8.31, it does not appear in the oldest manuscripts). We would say that the destination is unknown in only 14 cases (rather than 15). But we would particularly like to draw to your attention a

number of examples where the destination is definite and known, but not stated in the same clause as the verb. These are (1) 13.28, where the destination of *apelthontes* is clearly the field, which has not been mentioned since verse 24; (2) 14.16, where the destination is the villages mentioned in verse 15; (3) 21.29 and 30, where the destination is the vineyard mentioned in verse 28; (4) 25.10, where the destination is the shops of the vendors mentioned in verse 9. We would say that 20.4 should be interpreted in line with these examples and that the destination is not indefinite, but is the vineyard mentioned both in verse 2, and again in the previous sentence in verse 4. This line of reasoning seems to us to strengthen the traditional view that all five groups of labourers accepted the owner's offer of employment and went to the vineyard.

Finally, your comment on the Greek word *de*. This by no means always marks a sharp contrast, and is often impossible to distinguish from *kai*. Within this parable, *de* has a contrastive force in verses 11 and 13, but not in verses 2, 5b, 6 or 8. We cannot agree that the occurrence of *de* rather than *kai* in verse 4/5a is significant in the way you suggest.

All in all, we have to conclude that the men offered work at 9 o'clock accepted the offer and went to the vineyard. We would recommend that this interpretation should be retained in your new translation.

Although we cannot agree with the views you have put forward, we must nevertheless thank you warmly for taking the time to think them through and write them out. We are very encouraged that a translator cares enough about his work to take the trouble to challenge both the tradition and the consultants! You have compelled us to look again at a text whose meaning we have previously taken for granted, and this is always a healthy exercise. Although in this case we support the traditional interpretation of the text, we do recognize that no interpretation is automatically right just because it is traditional and that no consultant is automatically right just because he is a consultant! We hope that your example will stimulate other translators to take their tasks as seriously as you and your committee do.