

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

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Father in heaven is a favourite expression in the gospel of Matthew. It occurs in slightly different forms twenty times in this gospel, but only once each in Mark (11.25) and Luke (11.13) and not at all in John.

The differences in the form of expression in Matthew are minor ones. The form most familiar to Christians is the form *Our Father in heaven*, because this is the form used in Mt 6.9, the Lord's Prayer. In fact, this is the only time that the possessive pronoun *our* occurs in this phrase. The possessive pronoun is *your* (*plural*) in ten places in the 3rd edition of the UBS Greek text (Mt 5.16; 5.45; 5.48; 6.1; 6.14; 6.26; 6.32; 7.11; 18.14; 23.9) and *my* in nine places (Mt 7.21; 10.32; 10.33; 12.50; 15.13; 16.17; 18.10; 18.19; 18.35). Eight times the definite article *the* occurs before the word *heaven* in Greek (Mt 5.16; 6.1; 6.9; 7.11; 7.21; 10.32; 10.33; 16.17) and five times it does not (Mt 5.45; 12.50; 18.10; 18.14; 18.19). Seven times the noun phrase *in heaven* is replaced by the adjective *heavenly* (Mt 5.48; 6.14; 6.26; 6.32; 15.13; 18.35; 23.9). All the possible combinations of *my* and *your* with *in heaven*, *in the heaven* and *heavenly* occur at least twice.

Taking all this into account it seems fair to assume that these variations are related to the contexts where they occur, and do not represent any significant difference in the basic meaning of the expression. So the task that faces the translator is in principle the same in all the twenty places where the phrase occurs.

Father

There is usually no difficulty at all in choosing a term for *Father*. All societies and languages have a term for natural or biological father, even though in some cases, the term can also be used in an extended sense to include other male relatives especially the father's brothers. Sometimes, however, there is a problem with the social meaning (rather than with the natural meaning) of the term for *father*.

In Jewish society, it was the job of the father to supply love, care, provision and discipline for the children, and this is the basis of the comparison between God and an earthly father. But in certain other societies, some or all of these tasks would normally be performed by some other male relative, such as the grandfather or the mother's eldest brother. Accordingly, some translators have considered using expressions that would mean *Our Grandfather in heaven* or *Our Uncle in heaven*. However, such terms would distort the Jewish setting of scripture, and I know of no case where the translator finally decided to use anything other than the term for biological father.

Heaven

There is more commonly a problem in finding a term for heaven. In Hebrew and Greek, as well as in several modern European languages, the word used for *heaven* is the same as the word for *sky*, or is at least clearly related to it. English is somewhat unusual in having quite different words.

In many places where *heaven* occurs in scripture, a term whose basic meaning is *sky* will fit quite well. But in the expression we are considering here, *Our Father in heaven*, it may mislead the reader if a term for *sky* is used. In some languages, if we speak of *our Father in the sky*, the expression gives the meaning that God is "up there", and it follows from this that he cannot be "down here" at the same time. So if Christians learn to pray to *Our Father in the sky*, they are in effect removing God from the world of their everyday life and experience. The term *Father* should carry the message that God is near and important to his people. But the phrase *in the sky* may, so to speak, blot out this message with another false message that God is distant and irrelevant. If this happens, Christians can become more concerned with simply repeating the words of the Lord's Prayer than with enjoying a living relationship with the Lord.

The translator therefore needs to ask himself what is the underlying meaning of the words *in heaven* or *heavenly* in this context. It is important to find a satisfactory answer, because this expression is used in the Lord's Prayer, and will become familiar to many people who cannot or will not read the scriptures for themselves. It may therefore play a part in determining their whole response to the gospel. If the words used have the effect of pushing God into the distance, they are unlikely to encourage people to respond positively to the Christian gospel as a whole.

Matthew's use of *heaven*

Let us look at the places in Matthew and in the other gospels where *heaven* occurs. When we do this, we notice first that only Matthew uses the phrase *kingdom of heaven*, and he uses it about thirty times. Matthew also uses the phrase *kingdom of God* five times (3rd edition of UBS Greek text Mt 6.33; 12.28; 19.24; 21.31; 21.43), but this phrase is much more common in Mark where it comes about fifteen times, and in Luke, where it comes over thirty times. The interesting point is that often Mark and/or Luke use *kingdom of God* in a passage which is exactly parallel to one where Matthew uses *kingdom of heaven*. The following are among the best examples (quotations are from the RSV):

Matthew	Mark	Luke
5.3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is <i>the kingdom of heaven</i> .		6.20 Blessed are you poor, for yours is <i>the kingdom of God</i> .
11.11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in <i>the kingdom of heaven</i> is greater than he.		7.28 I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John; yet he who is least in <i>the kingdom of God</i> is greater than he.

13.11 And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of *the kingdom of heaven*, but to them it has not been given."

4.11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of *the kingdom of God*, but for those outside everything is in parables . . ."

8.10 . . . he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of *the kingdom of God*; but for others they are in parables . . ."

19.14 Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs *the kingdom of heaven*."

10.14 But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs *the kingdom of God*."

18.16 But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them; for to such belongs *the kingdom of God*."

19.23 And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter *the kingdom of heaven*."

10.23 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter *the kingdom of God*!"

18.24 Jesus looking at him said, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter *the kingdom of God*!"

Passages like these have led scholars to conclude that *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God* have exactly the same meaning, but that Matthew usually followed the Jewish custom of avoiding direct mention of God. Instead he would often use the word *heaven*, which stood for *God* in a figure of speech called a euphemism.

This custom is found occasionally in the other gospels also, and sometimes even in places where Matthew does not follow it. For instance in Mark 14.62, the high priest asks Jesus "Are you the Christ, *the Son of the Blessed*?" In the parallel passage, Matthew 27.63, the plain meaning is stated with no euphemism "Tell us if you are the Christ, *the Son of God*." In Luke 15.18 and 21 (which have no parallel in Matthew or Mark) the words of the Prodigal Son are given as "Father, I have sinned against *heaven* and before you." Here *heaven* is clearly a euphemism for *God*.

We have now shown that the use of the word *heaven* was frequently a way of avoiding mention of God directly, and that its occurrence was particularly common in Matthew's gospel. Is there any evidence to suggest that "*heaven*" or "*heavenly*" may be a way of avoiding mention of God in the expression *Father in heaven/heavenly Father*. I believe there is.

The phrase *your heavenly Father* occurs in both Mt 6.26 and 6.32. These verses are paralleled in Luke 12.24 and 12.30 and the wording is as follows (RSV):

Matthew

6.26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet *your heavenly Father* feeds them.

6.32 For the Gentiles seek all these things; and *your heavenly Father* knows that you need them all.

Luke

12.24 Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet *God* feeds them.

12.30 For all the nations of the world seek these things; and *your Father* knows that you need them.

In the first instance, Luke has *God* where Matthew has *your heavenly Father* and in the second Luke has *your Father*. This suggests that Luke's expressions *your Father* and *God* can both be regarded as equivalent in meaning to Matthew's *your heavenly Father*.

In another passage, there are interesting parallels between Matthew, Mark and Luke, as follows (RSV):

Matthew	Mark	Luke
12.50 For whoever does the will of <i>my Father in heaven</i> is my brother, and sister, and mother.	3.35 Whoever does the will of <i>God</i> is my brother, and sister, and mother.	8.21 My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of <i>God</i> and do it.

This suggests that the expressions *my Father in heaven* and *God* are also equivalent in meaning.

We could go on to ask whether the words *God* and *Father* are ever used together in the gospels, in expressions like *God your Father*, or *my Father God*.

It is rather a surprise to find that no such expressions occur in Matthew, Mark or Luke. The nearest approach to such a phrase is in Jn 6.27 *God the Father*. The use of *God* and *Father* together is of course very common in the New Testament letters. Every one of the letters that bear Paul's name mentions *God our Father* or *God the Father* in the opening greeting, and from these frequent occurrences, such phrases have come into common use in the speech and prayers of Christians all over the world.

Conclusion

So far, then, we see three facts: (1) Only Matthew uses the distinctive expressions *heavenly Father* and *Father in heaven*. (2) Jewish custom often avoided direct mention of God by the use of euphemisms such as *heaven*. Parallel passages in Mark and Luke suggest that *heaven* | *heavenly* in Matthew's distinctive expressions may be such a euphemism. (3) Matthew, Mark and Luke never use *God* and *Father* together in a single phrase.

Taking all these points into consideration, we suggest that it would be quite legitimate to translate *Father in heaven* and *heavenly Father* in Matthew by *my/our/your Father God* or *God my/our/your/the Father*. Such a procedure will avoid the problems of a literal translation of *heaven/heavenly* which we discussed earlier. It will also retain a special expression distinctive of Matthew. This expression will add no new element of meaning to scripture, since it is already common in the letters of Paul.

The expression which would then be distinctive of Matthew would certainly be different in form from the Greek, but its underlying meaning would be substantially the same. It would be clearer, because it avoided a euphemism, and it would also be unlikely to mislead the reader as a literal translation might. It may therefore be proposed that where *Father in heaven* or *heavenly Father* is a translation problem, translators should consider an expression equivalent to *Father God* as a possible solution.