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ANOTHER LOOK AT THE TRANSLATION OF MATTHEW 16.19

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Introduction

The interpretation and translation of Matt 16.19 have generated a lot of controversy among NT scholars. In their examination of this difficult text, Roman Catholic and Protestant exegetes have arrived at conclusions that are quite intriguing.[1] The paper takes a look at some existing translations of Matt 16.19 that have influenced the theologies of receptor audiences with particular reference to the interplay of divine and human authorities. It is being argued that a valid interpretation and translation of the text necessitates a careful analysis of its rare periphrastic constructions.[2] A "model translation" is finally suggested which, in the present writer's opinion, is capable of generating a theology that does full justice to the Greek text.

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1 The literature on this subject is vast. But the text has been conventionally understood as the authority initially conferred on Peter to admit or exclude others from God's kingdom. From a rabbinic perspective, it has also been interpreted as the ability to unveil and teach the true divinely ordained Torah. For an interesting link to rabbinic thought, see H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch Bd I: Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1978), 730-746. A good summary of various other interpretations, including exorcism, is provided by R. H. Hiers, "Binding and Loosing: The Matthean Authorizations," in *JBL* 104 (1985): 233-250. The closely related text in Matt 18.18 is usually viewed as a reference to the corporate authority conferred on the church to discipline/excommunicate recalcitrant members. J. A. Burgess, *A History of the Exegesis of Matthew 16:17-19 from 1785 to 1965*, Ph. D. diss., University of Basel, 1966, provides a comprehensive summary of discussions by previous generations of Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians that have examined this text particularly in relation to the question of apostolic succession and the papacy. The figure of Peter in Matthew's Gospel has featured prominently in such discussions, and until the middle of the 20th century, confessional interests dominated the agenda. Later exegetical approaches to the text have, in the wake of modern ecumenical scholarship, produced two dominant schools of thought, namely:

(a) That Matthew portrays Peter, in the wake of developments within contemporary Pharisaic Judaism, as the "supreme Rabbi" to whom Jesus has entrusted the authority of teaching = office of the keys, and on whom Jesus has built his church. For a good discussion, see C. Kähler, "Zur Form-und Traditionsgeschicte von Matth. xvi. 17-19," in *NTS* 23 (1976-1977): 36-58; D. Senior, "Directions in Matthean Studies," in D. E. Aune (ed.): *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 8, would also like us to consider "the Pharisaic reform as an immediate and direct context for Matthew's Gospel."

(b) That Peter, as representative or spokesman, provides the Matthean community with an example of what it means, both positively and negatively, to be a Christian. See P. S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (N. Y.: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), 97; J. D. Kinsbury, "The Figure of Peter in Matthew's Gospel as a Theological Problem," in *JBL* 98 (1979): 67-83.

2 Reference will be made to the closely related text of Matt 18.18 for comparative purposes.

The periphrastic constructions in Matthew 16.19

If the initial statement of this important verse: *dōsō soi tas kleidas tēs basileias tōn ouranōn* ("I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven") has itself generated much controversy in scholarly circles, its subsequent periphrastically-loaded statement: *kai ho ean dēsēs epi tēs gēs estai dedemenon en tois ouranois, kai ho ean lusēs epi tēs gēs estai lelumenon en tois ouranois* has proven to be much more delicate to handle. How is this latter statement to be interpreted and translated? Greek grammarians have grappled with it and come up with some very interesting proposals. One school of thought proposes that the future auxilliary *estai* and the perfect passive participles *dedemenon/lelumenon* which together constitute the periphrastic aspect of the sentence, should be translated as an English future perfect passive: "shall have been bound/loosed." Such a viewpoint presupposes that the result of a future event (binding and loosing by the Matthean community of which Peter is a forerunner/representative) is already determined by an event which had taken place in the metaphysical realm. According to J. A. Hewett:

> The construction declares that a completed heavenly action and its continuing results will come to exist on earth upon the completion of a future earthly event.[1]

Hewett is supported by other grammarians who consider the perfect passive participles (*dedemenon/lelumenon*) in conjunction with the future auxilliary *estai* as referring to the earthly appropriation of an accomplished heavenly event.[2]

J. R. Mantey has probably been the most outspoken 20th century proponent of this view. In two separate articles, Mantey has vehemently defended the thesis that any translation other than an English future perfect passive equivalent is a serious deviation from the Greek texts of Matt 16.19 and 18.18.[3] Accordingly, translations like the Geneva Bible, AV, RV, RSV[NRSV], NEB, REB, NIV, LB, TEV, Moffatt, Berkeley, NAB, *Die Gute Nachricht*, *Louis Segond*, and *Francais Courant* which render the Greek of both texts in the simple future passive [will be bound/loosed] should be regarded as mistranslations. The UBS Handbook on Matthew, while trying to avoid identification with any doctrinal position and to concentrate on practical translation issues, presents only the RSV and TEV renderings both of which fall into the category of "mistranslations" according to the viewpoint which Mantey and others represent.[4]

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1 J. A. Hewett, *New Testament Greek. A Beginning and Intermediate Grammar* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 152; W. D. Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 80: has also argued that a translation such as [shall be bound/loosed] should be rejected since it conveys the wrong impression that "the apostles' acts will determine the policies of heaven ... This incorrect translation has given expositors and theologians a great deal of trouble."

2 J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek Vol. III Syntax* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 69; N. Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1965), 80; F. Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1976), 49: "It is the church on earth carrying out heaven's decisions, not heaven ratifying the church's decision."

3 J. R. Mantey, "Distorted Translations in John 20:23; Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:18," in *Review and Expositor* 78 (1981): 409-416; also his article "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:23, Matth 16:19, and Matth 18:18," in *JBL* 58 (1939): 243-249 cited in S. E. Porter, "Vague Verbs, Periphrastics, and Matth 16:19," in *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 2 (1988): 158-159.

4 B. M. Newman and P. C. Stine, *A Translator's Handbook on The Gospel of Matthew* (London/N.Y./Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1988), 539-540. The Handbook does not deal with the problem of these periphrastic constructions in Matt 16.19 and 18.18. Rather, it offers the following suggestion: "For many Christians this is an extremely sensitive passage, and translations should allow for openness of interpretation" (540).

Going by this criterion, translations of Matt 16.19 which are most likely to pass the test include:

New American Standard Bible

I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

The Amplified Bible

I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind—that is, declare to be improper and unlawful—on earth must be already bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth—declare lawful—must be what is already loosed in heaven.

Die Luther Bibel

Ich will dir die Schlüssel des Himmelreichs geben: alles was du auf Erden binden wirst, soll auch im Himmel gebunden sein, und alles was du auf Erden lösen wirst, soll auch im Himmel gelöst sein.

La Bible OSTY

Je te donnerai les clefs du royaume des Cieux, et ce que tu lieras sur la terre se trouvera lié dans les cieux, et ce que tu delieras sur la terre se trouvera delié dans les cieux.

La Sainte Bible (Du chanoine Crampon)

Je te donnerai les clefs du royaume des cieux: ce que tu auras lié sur la terre se trouvera lié dans les cieux, et ce que tu auras delié sur la terre se trouvera delié dans les cieux.

Biblia Sacra Vulgata

et tibi dabo claves regni caelorum et quodcumque ligaveris super terram erit ligatum in caelis et quodcumque solveris super terram erit solutum in caelis.

Others are:

Die Heilige Schrift (Übersetzt von Dr. Hermann Menge), A. S. Worrell, J. B. Phillips, and J. B. Rotherham

Interestingly, Mantey touches on the Septuagint translation of Gen 30.33 where the grammatical construction is similar to the ones we have in Matt 16.19/18.18. In the agreement Jacob had with Laban prior to the separation of his goats from the rest of the herd, it is stated among others: Everyone that is not speckled or spotted among the goats ... if found with me, *keklemmenon estai par emoi*. This periphrastic expression is translated by Mantey as: "will have been stolen by me"[1] and by some Bible versions—guided by the Hebrew text which employs a passive participle construction *ganub hu' ittî-* as follows:

KJV: shall be counted stolen with me/ RSV: shall be counted stolen
REB: will have been stolen
NIV: will be considered stolen

1 Mantey, "Distorted Translations," 413.

TEV: you will know that it has been stolen
Luther: *das sei ein Diebstahl, wenn es sich bei mir findet*

Obviously, not all the above translations fit neatly into the scheme of an English future perfect passive rendering, despite the fact that the LXX text is clearly in the form of a future perfect passive periphrastic, such as we find in Matt 16.19 and 18.18. Of these translations, it is the Luther version that, to our mind, most effectively recaptures the sense of the Hebrew text which the Septuagint has ingeniously attempted to translate. The Luther translation postulates two hypothetical situations that are essentially simultaneous: *in case* a goat that is not speckled or spotted is found in Jacob's possession, that should, within that moment of discovery, be considered as a theft case. Even though the KJV, RSV, and NIV translations have also attempted to articulate this thought quite creditably, the Luther rendering is most captivating. It is noteworthy that we are faced with a tenseless Hebrew passive participle construction that can also be interpreted hypothetically, given the conditional nature of Jacob's full statement. It could be argued that the Septuagint translation employs a future perfect passive periphrastic construction to bring out both the hypothetical and simultaneous nuances of the text. This can in fact be substantiated with parallel texts from classical Greek literature and the Ptolemy era. This would also have far-reaching consequences for the interpretation and translation of the similar but rare periphrastic constructions in Matt 16.19/18.18. For one thing, we are dealing here with conditional sentences whose temporal evaluation is not straightforward. Syntactically, these can be categorized as "Third Class Conditionals" made up of *ean* or its equivalent plus the subjunctive [*desēs/desete, lusēs/lusete*] in the protasis, and any mode or tense in the apodosis [the future perfect passive periphrastics *estai dedemenon/lelumenon*], as in the Matthean texts. Greek grammarians generally agree that such conditionals do usually posit a hypothetical situation with prospects of fulfilment.[1] In line with this grammatical principle, the text in Matt 16.19 more probably reflects a projected event, which though initially hypothetical, has the dynamism of becoming a fulfilled reality, if carried out. Hence what Jesus seems to be saying, from the Matthean perspective, is that: *in case* the necessity of binding or loosing something on earth arises and it is duly executed, the expected outcome is a "situation of boundness or loosedness" in heaven, precisely because the keys [*tas kleidas*] symbolizing co-operative divine/human authority: mutual partnership between God and human agents, is already in operation dynamically. It is the dynamic extension of God's sovereignty from the heavenly to the earthly domain through co-operation with inspired human channels.[2]

This observation also implies that caution must be exercised in translating the text futuristically as "will be bound/loosed" since the syntax of Matt 16.19 [see

1 Blass/Debrunner/Rehkopf, *Grammatik des Neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, (Section 371, 4); W. D. Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar*, 195-196.

2 Consistent with a major theological agenda of Matthew whereby the Matthean community's identity and "authentication" need to be clearly spelt out in the wake of the crisis within post A. D. 70 Judaism, the community's authority, of which Peter is a primary representative, is portrayed as being co-extensive with that of heaven itself. The construction in Matt 16.19 does in fact compare favourably with the LXX of Gen 30.33 where its subjunctive protasis is interpreted in close relation to the periphrastic future perfect passive apodosis: *keklemmenon estai par emoi* to bring out the force of the hypothetical but dynamic/simultaneous event being postulated.

also 18.18] does not necessarily express a strict chronological event. The phenomenon being described here is essentially simultaneous rather than sequential. Interpreting it sequentially will tend to swing the pendulum in favour of "human initiative and divine response," which is not the thought being conveyed by Matt 16.19. That is why E. Burton's position of putting the two Matthean texts [16.19/18.18] together with Luke 12.52 and Heb 2.13 as periphrastic future perfects "expressing a future state"[1] should be questioned, especially if he understands that sequentially. In Luke 12.52, the periphrastic future perfect passive *esontai ... diamemerismenoi* is clearly futuristic and can be translated as "will be divided," a reference to Jesus' prediction of division in family circles on account of his person. The expression *apo tou nun* "from now on" gives it a time reference pointing to a subsequent [future] event. There is no hypothetical situation here, and the mood of the syntax is, unlike Matt 16.19 [18.18] and Gen 30.33 (LXX), indicative rather than subjunctive. In Heb 2.13, the periphrastic future perfect *esomai pepoithōs* "I will put my trust" [see also Isa 8.17] deals mainly with a durative future "implying a state or period of trust, rather than a single act."[2] Both examples from Luke 12.52 and Heb 2.13 can also be viewed as rhetorically more forceful expressions in a futuristic sense, using periphrasis as an effective grammatical tool.[3] This may be illustrated with two examples from the Greek NT:

Present:

Acts 25.10a *hestōs epi tou bēmatos Kaisaros eimi, ...*
Standing before the tribunal of Caesar I am, ...
"I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, ... "

a reference to Paul's present defence before Festus in the tribunal and subsequent appeal to the Emperor.

Imperfect:

Luke 2.51a *... kai ēn hupotassomenos autois.*
... And he was being submissive/obedient to them.
" ... and he kept on being submissive/obedient to them."

an allusion to Jesus' continued and daily submission to his parents in Nazareth.

As has been hinted at previously, the thought being conveyed by the rare periphrastic construction of Matt 16.19 [18.18] can also be illustrated with some key parallel examples from classical Greek literature.[4] In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus comments on the high risk involved in not responding quickly to the enemy's threat on his rule/security as follows:

1 E. Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900), 45.

2 P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 169.

3 M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 125 has also drawn attention to the special use of periphrastics in hellenistic Greek for rhetorical purposes. According to Blass/Debrunner/Rehkopf, *Grammatik des Neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, 285 (Section 352), "Zuweilen dient die Umschreibung dem rhetorisch kräftgeren Ausdruck ... "

4 The author is particularly indebted to J. M. Stahl, *Kritisch-Historische Syntax des griechischen Verbums der klassischen Zeit* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1965), 144 where key examples are cited from the works of Homer, Plato, Sophocles, and Xenophon. The author has also cross-checked with the original sources and attempted his own glossing.

ei d' ẽsuchazōn prosmenō, ta toude men pepragmen' estai, tâma d' ẽmartēmena (Soph. OT. 621). The statement suggests that *in case* Oedipus procrastinates and is not smart enough to take steps against the enemy, that will be *tantamount to* an obvious situation of having been outwitted: the enemy's plans "shall have prevailed" [*ta ... pepragmen' estai*] and his own plans shall have, ipso facto, become a total failure [*tâma d' ẽmartēmena*].

In Xenophon's Anabasis (X. An. III 2, 31), austerity measures proposed by Xenophon to instil discipline in his troops [in their march against the enemy] suggests among others: *in case* any one among Xenophon's troops goes astray/exhibits traits of indiscipline [*tis apeithẽ*] whoever discovers it is to join with his officer to discipline him. When that is done, it would *simultaneously* serve the purpose of creating much disappointment in the enemy forces or highly demoralizing them [*outōs hoi polemioi pleiston epseusmenoi esontai*]: "by so doing, the enemy shall have been greatly disappointed/deceived [in their expectations]."[1]

Together with Gen 30.33 (LXX) and the Matthean texts (Matt 16.19/18.18), these examples seem to offer strong indications that it would be an oversimplification to literally translate Greek periphrastic future perfect passives as English future perfect passives, denoting the continuing results/impact of a previous action. Equally questionable is an English simple future passive translation, given the hypothetical nature and temporal ambiguity of such Greek constructions whose subjunctive protasis cannot be divorced from the apodosis without distorting the meaning.

Concluding remarks and a suggested translation of Matthew 16.19

With particular reference to Matt 16.19, it could be argued that the "perfective" [shall have been bound/loosed] and "futuristic" [will be bound/loosed] translations, whatever their merits, fail to do adequate justice to the type of theology being advocated by the author of Matthew's Gospel through the use of a known but rare periphrastic construction. This theology, in our opinion, centers on a divine sovereignty which is neither authoritarian nor predestinarian, but co-operative. It is God himself exercising his authority through human channels *who are enabled to simultaneously participate with him* in ministry.

If this simultaneous/co-operative dimension is taken into account, then it would be valid to translate Matt 16.19 as follows:

> I will give you the keys that will enable you to partake of heavenly authority, [so that] whatever you are in process of binding on earth is also being bound in heaven, and whatever you are in process of loosing on earth is also being loosed in heaven.

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1 Without going into any further detail due to economy of space, other interesting parallel examples of the periphrastic future perfect passive in classical Greek literature can be found in: Homer's *Iliad* (I 212; II 257); Xenophon's *Hellenica* (V 2, 27); and Plato's *Gorgias* (469d). E. Mayser, *Grammatik der Griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit* Bd II. (Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1926), 225, also cites a number of examples including the following [translations by the present author]:

(a) *esometha ouk ēdikēmena*: " ... we shall not have been treated unjustly" (Eleph. 27).

(b) *esomai anteilēmmenos*: " ... I shall have been helped/assisted" (Rein. 17, 17 [110-119]).