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TRANSLATING "THE KINGDOM OF GOD" AND "THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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It is fairly well accepted among biblical scholars that the word "Kingdom", both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, when applied to God, has as its primary meaning "God's kingly rule". That is, the basic focus is on the actual rule of God rather than on the realm or territory over which he rules. But however widely this thesis is accepted, no one has yet done a thoroughgoing study on the implications of this observation for the translation of the New Testament.

It is also generally agreed among New Testament scholars that Matthew uses "the Kingdom of heaven" in exactly the same sense as the phrase "the Kingdom of God". (A clear example of the parallelism between "Kingdom of God" and "Kingdom of heaven" is seen in Matt. 19:23-24.) But here again most translators have not really dealt with the implications of this observation. That is, most translators have retained Matthew's peculiar form rather than translating in such a way as to make the meaning clear for their readers. There are a few exceptions to this. The Jerusalem Bible, though retaining the phrase "Kingdom of heaven", does give a note at 3:2 ("The phrase is proper to Matthew and reflects the Jewish scruple which substituted metaphor for the divine name."). And the recently published French ecumenical translation (*Nouveau Testament: Traduction œcuménique de la Bible*) also uses the device of a footnote to indicate that Matthew used this term in keeping with the Jewish tradition of avoiding pronunciation of the sacred name. The New American Bible in a number of places translates "the Kingdom of heaven" as "the reign of God", and gives a note at the first occurrence of the term in the New Testament ("... literally, 'the kingdom of heaven.' 'Heaven' is a conventional expression which avoids using the divine name. The term invokes God's sovereign authority over the human race. It announces that a new intervention of God is beginning in history which invites Israel to accept the prophetic manifestation of his will through the Baptizer.") And the New Testament in Today's Dutch Version (*Groot Nieuws voor U*) sometimes

translates "Kingdom of God" instead of "Kingdom of heaven". Some other translations utilize a glossary to make the identity—Today's French Version (*Bonnes Nouvelles Aujourd'hui*), The New Indonesian Version (*Berita Untuk Manusia*), Today's English Version (*Good News for Modern Man*).

But the only major language translation that has really done anything dynamic with the phrase "the Kingdom of heaven" is the Today's German Version (*Die Gute Nachricht*), which has altogether dropped it, attempting to give a meaningful equivalent in each individual context. In the recently completed Common Malay New Testament "the Kingdom of heaven" was also dropped, for two reasons. First, it was felt more important to convey the meaning of the phrase to the readers than it was to maintain a peculiarity of Matthew's style. Second, in an Islamic context the phrase "Kingdom of heaven", when unqualified, has special problems, since it is heavily loaded with sexual connotations.

Although the basic meaning of these two phrases is the kingly rule of God, the focus is different in various contexts. This observation is important for translation, and should be pointed out at the start. In the New Testament "the Rule of God" is used in at least the following ways. (1) *Focus on the (initial) activity of God in bringing about his rule in this world.* An example of this is to be found in Matt. 3:2, which RSV translates "the kingdom of heaven is at hand". The focus of this verse is on the fact that God will soon begin (or has already begun) his rule in this world. (2) *Focus on the acceptance of God's rule in one's life.* An illustration of this use is Matt. 19:23 (parallel Mark 10:23 and Luke 18:24), which RSV translates "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven". The meaning of this verse is "it will be hard for a rich man to submit himself to God's rule". Eduard Schweizer, in his discussion of the Kingdom of God (*The Good News According to Mark*, pp. 45–47) states, "He (Jesus) rarely spoke of God as king, nor did he ever speak of the establishment of God's sovereignty over Israel or over the world. Instead, he spoke frequently of one's entering the kingdom. Therefore, the kingdom is more like an area or a sphere of authority into which one can enter, so 'realm' would be a better translation (Mark 9:47; 10:15, 23–25; Matt. 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23)." (3) *Focus on the consummation of God's activity in bringing about his rule in this world.* Note Matt. 5:3, which is translated by RSV as "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". There are several exegetical problems involved in the interpretation of this verse, but depending upon how it is taken, one may translate "they will enjoy the blessings of God's rule" or "they enjoy the blessings of God's rule". This focus on blessings enjoyed by those who are under God's rule is a very important aspect of the New Testament concept of the Kingdom of God, for the coming of God's rule was no less than the coming of the long awaited salvation that God had promised his people, the new world order in which God alone would rule. This has important implications for translation, especially in those cultures where the concept of a "rule" has connotations of oppression and violence, or where people have no concept of a powerful ruler.

In the following paragraphs some New Testament occurrences of the phrase "Kingdom of God/Heaven/Son of Man/etc." will be discussed and meaningful equivalents will be suggested.

Matthew 3:2: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This verse, a part of John the Baptist's preaching, should be taken together with 4:17 (parallel Mark 1:15), since the passages are identical and so present the same exegetical and translational problems. Matt. 4:17 repeats verbally Matt. 3:2, and Mark 1:15 is the same except that he has "Kingdom of God" in place of "Kingdom of heaven". The basic exegetical problem in this verse relates to the interpretation of the Greek verb, that is, whether it indicates that the Kingdom of God has already arrived or whether it is soon to arrive. Most modern translators and commentators seem to prefer the second of these two possibilities (NEB "is upon you", JB "is close at hand", Moffatt "is near", Goodspeed "is coming", Barclay "is almost here"), while RSV and NAB are ambiguous ("is at hand"), and Phillips follows the first exegesis ("has arrived"). Die Gute Nachricht evidently also accepts the exegesis that God's rule is imminent, though not yet present, and restructures the verse entirely: "God will now accomplish his work and establish his rule." The Common Malay translates "God will soon establish his rule." In cultures where the concept of a rule always connotes something evil or oppressive (see above), then one may want to translate: "The time is near when God will come to save his people."

Matthew 4:23: "And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people."

Most translations of this verse are a bit ambiguous. Compare, for example, RSV "the gospel of the kingdom" (so also NEB) and TEV "the Good News of the Kingdom" (so JB, NAB, Goodspeed, Barclay, BNA). Moffatt has "the gospel of the Reign", while the Spanish *Versión Popular* has "the good news of the reign of God". Die Gute Nachricht translates "the good news that God will now complete his work", while the Common Malay has "the good news that God will soon establish his rule".

As with the previous verse, it is possible to understand this as something that is presently taking place or as something that will take place in the immediate future. The decision is not easy, though it would seem that the emphasis is more on the latter; however, since the other interpretation is also possible, one may prefer to translate "the good news that God is now establishing his rule".

Matthew 5:3 (also 5:10): "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

What is meant by the expression "the Kingdom of heaven *belongs to* them"—TEV (RSV, JB, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven"; Phillips, NEB, "the Kingdom of heaven is theirs"; NAB, "the reign of God is theirs"; Moffatt, "the Realm of heaven is theirs"; and Goodspeed, "the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them")? That is, how can one really speak of persons "possessing" or "owning" the Kingdom of heaven, especially if the Kingdom of heaven is taken in the sense of the rule of God? The Greek words may also be translated "the Kingdom of heaven *consists of* persons such as these", and

that is certainly the best sense in the context. But whether one takes the meaning of the Greek to be “belongs to” or “consists of”, the emphasis is essentially the same in this verse: the focus is on the benefits or blessings shared by those persons who experience the rule of God in their lives.

Only a few translators have really made a serious attempt at a dynamic equivalent of this verse. Die Gute Nachricht translates “they will be God’s people when he completes his work” and Barclay has “for the blessings of the Kingdom of heaven are theirs here and now”. The Greek text is actually in the present tense (“the Kingdom of heaven is . . .”), and so the basis for Barclay’s rendering; but it is possible to take the present with a future force, and so translate as Die Gute Nachricht has done.

Matthew 5:19: “Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

This is the first of those passages where the idea of a place (“in the kingdom”) is connected with the concept of the kingdom, and this is a difficult meaning to express adequately, when one takes seriously the meaning of the kingdom as the rule of God. Most translators have simply maintained the literal phrase “the kingdom of heaven”, though NAB has “the kingdom of God”. Die Gute Nachricht, which often uses the phrase “God’s new world” when the focus is on the future consummation of the kingdom, translates “shall be least of all in God’s new world”.

The use of the place idea in such a context is a way of focusing on what it will be like when God establishes his rule. For that reason “in God’s new world” seems an excellent way of translating “in the kingdom”, since the idea of God’s rule is clearly implicit (*God’s new world*) and made explicit is the transformation effected by God’s rule (*God’s new world*). The Common Malay translates this passage as “will be considered least when God establishes his rule”. Alternatively, in cultures where the concept of a rule always bears negative connotations, one may translate “in the kingdom” as “among God’s people” or “among those whom God will accept as his own people”.

Matthew 5:20: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Once again most translations are rather literal with “enter the kingdom of heaven”, though NAB does have “the kingdom of God” and Die Gute Nachricht “God’s new world”. The translators of the Common Malay understand “entering the kingdom of heaven” to focus on the benefits shared by those persons who would experience God’s rule, and so translated “enjoy the blessings of God’s rule”. Here again, if the idea of “rule” must be avoided, then one may translate the entire expression “will not enter into the kingdom of heaven” as “before God will accept you as one of his people”.

(It is hoped that in a future issue of Practical Papers for the Bible Translator this article will be continued with a discussion of the meaning of “Kingdom of God” in a number of other contexts.—Editor).