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AT GOD'S RIGHT HAND

How do we know that God is left-handed? He must be, because Jesus is standing on his right hand. (Acts 7:55-56) It's an old joke, but worth repeating if only to introduce an important concept. Jesus is sitting on (or at) the right hand of God.

Why is that important? What are the consequences of that fact? How does it affect the thinking of many in the religious world today?

It is important because Jesus is Messiah, and the son of God. Of whom else can it be said that he is sitting at God's right hand? Many people, many good people, have died. David was among the greatest of all men, in God's eyes. Yet it was David who said, "The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." (Ps 110:1) Jesus (as recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Peter, and the writer of Hebrews all point out that David spoke of Messiah. When Stephen told the hostile crowd that he saw the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God, it is no wonder that they stoned him. These were people who knew the scriptures. They knew that Stephen was claiming that Jesus (whom they had heard refer to himself as the Son of Man) was Messiah. They could not believe this, so they chose to shoot—well, stone—the messenger. But Stephen was right. He saw Messiah at the right hand of God.

What does that mean? It means that he can intercede with God for us directly. (Rom 8:34) Additionally, it means that Jesus is now ruling, above all other rulers.

Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: (Eph 1:20-21)

Jesus is ruler of all. He is not just a king on the earth, but has been elevated beyond earthly rule. "Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him." (1 Pet 3:22)

What does this mean to religious thinking today? There are many that posit that Jesus will return to reign on earth for a thousand years. That Jesus is seated at the right

hand of God militates against this idea. First of all, what would be the point? Jesus demoted himself once (Php 2:6-9), but that was so he could become the sacrifice for sin. Since he doesn't need to do that again (Heb 9:26-28), why should he reign on earth just to prove God a liar? "For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." (1 Cor 15:25-26) If Jesus is to return to earth to reign, then he would have to give up his current reign. But even according to millennialist theory death would still remain. If not, again what is the point?

There is a more serious consequence if Jesus is to reign on earth. "We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." (Heb 8:1) "But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God." (Heb 10:12) If Jesus returns to earth to reign here, he must give up the office of our high priest. He must say that his sacrifice was insufficient to save. If he leaves his reign in heaven there would no longer be any sacrifice for sin. He would not be a priest forever. The second he takes up a limited reign on earth, giving up his reign over angels and powers, he instantly becomes the ruler of a world of sinners who will have lost hope. Once the eternal high priest gives up that office, the sacrifices made under that covenant become null and void.

Jesus is sitting at God's right hand for a reason. It is a reason that offers all people hope. If he leaves God's right hand, we have no hope. He can't break the covenant just to take it up again. Once the contract is void, it would take another death to reestablish it. Many hope Jesus comes to reign on earth soon. They would do better to hope it were never.

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CHURCH WORDS

Much of what we do and say in religion is strongly influenced by the King James Version of the Bible. That is not necessarily a bad thing. That version was, in its day, an excellent translation of the available texts. For those that speak or can understand fifteenth-century English it is still a good version. (If you saw an original version, though, you might not be able to read it because of standardized spellings that have developed since 1611. The versions we have today have had spellings modernized.) Another advantage of that version is that, outside the United Kingdom, it is in the public domain; writers can quote it freely without having to request permission. One of the biggest problems, though, with that version of the Bible, and many subsequent versions, is that the translators chose not to translate certain words.

In some cases, the committee chose to transliterate some words. That is, instead of translating them they brought the original Greek or Hebrew, or the Latin, into English. One simple example would be the word “Jehovah,” which is a transliteration of the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. More modern translations use the word “LORD” in all capitals. In some other cases the

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translators chose to use “church words.” These are terms that had been accepted by scholars of the Bible, but often mean little to the common man. It is some of these church words and transliterations that we will look at in this article.

Church

Church is one of those words that has nothing to do with the word it is supposed to be translating. The word comes from a Greek word meaning Lord. (Think of the “Kyrie” common in the mass of the Catholic Church.) It denotes subjection to a lord or master. The Greek word commonly translated as church means an assembly. It comes from a combination word with a literal meaning of “called out.” In ancient Athens, when city business was to be carried out, the citizens were called together in a true democracy. This word for an assembly to conduct city business was also used for the assembly of Christians

together. Why the translators of the King James Version, and subsequent versions even until today, used a different Greek word to translate this one baffles the mind. Clearly, the term “church” had gained popularity for the building in which the assembly was held. Equally clearly, many such buildings prior to 1611 had been financed by a lord for use of worshippers of the Lord.

Unfortunately, this literal “church word” has developed a different meaning than would have happened if the king’s translating committee had referred to the assembly rather than the church. Today the primary meaning of the word is a building. Because of this, people have lost the importance of the church (assembly) itself. If the church is a building rather than a family it becomes very impersonal. It is not important where, or if, you “go to church” because you cannot establish a relationship with bricks and mortar. You cannot encourage sheetrock and cinderblock. Steel girders and acoustic tile cannot pray for or with you. By making a church into a building, people have removed the functions of the assembly from their lives. If the church is only a building, then there truly is no need to give attention to it. It is no wonder that many churches (buildings) are practically empty each time they open their doors.

Another result of this depersonalization of the church is an increased reverence for mere buildings. “Don’t run in church.” “Keep your voice down in the sanctuary.” I knew of one conservative congregation that, surprisingly, had a sign above the door to the auditorium reminding people to show reverence after passing through those doors. What? You can be irreverent in the lobby, but not in the auditorium. It’s just a building. The same as an office building, a school, or a gymnasium. Maybe because it was paid for from the church treasury certain uses are inappropriate. Nevertheless, some people have shown more reverence for the building and its furnishings than for the people who assembled to worship God and encourage one another. This ought never be.

Paradise

I don’t know exactly when a garden became the abode of the righteous dead. The use of the word “Paradise” (Arabic for garden) to describe a beautiful place for the dead was popularized by Islamic doctrine.

It is entirely possible that that was influenced by Jewish thought. Paul once uses the word apparently to describe heaven. “And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to

utter.” (2 Cor 12:3-4) Whether he is equating Paradise with the third heaven is open to debate. Nevertheless, Paul is certainly not talking about an earthly garden. So it is probable that some concept of heaven as a paradise was already known.

The other uses of the word in the King James Version, and hence even to modern times, reveal the clear bias of the translators in favor of a doctrine of the time. There is no clear reason to transliterate the word rather than translate it.

Jesus told the robber on the cross, “This day you will be with me in the garden.” Did he mean in some abode of the dead? Or did he mean that the man would be buried in a garden just like he was? Leaving aside the debate about whether he was telling the man on the cross he would be saved or not, by failing to translate the word the committee, and most translators since, reveals a clear bias toward the idea that the dead retain consciousness between death and the resurrection.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus would seem to indicate that there is some abode of conscious souls between death and judgement. Other passages seem to say otherwise. “For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?” (Ps 6:5) There is even question about what happened to Jesus while in the grave. “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father.” (Jn 10:17)

The other passage using the word “paradise” could just as easily, and more poetically, have been translated with the word “garden.” “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” (Rev 2:7) Again this shows a tendency to believe that the word necessarily means heaven. That may be what the angel means here, but there is even some argument about that. Whatever the truth is, it is not a translator’s place to create a bias by choosing not to translate a word. And yet, that is what most translators continue to do today.

Faith

Faith is not one of those words that just was not translated. The way we use it today, however, may make it a mistranslation in most modern versions. Faith has become such a “church word” that we may have lost its original meaning.

Ask the average person in America today if they have faith in God and they will probably answer in the affirmative. People believe in God, but many don’t really have faith in God.

Some commentators prefer to use the word “trust” in place of “faith.” This is a valid concept, and a valid translation. Faith is much more than simple assent that God exists. It involves trust that God will do what he says he will. “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that

he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Heb 11:6) Both belief in the existence of God and trust in his promises are required to be pleasing to God.

The root meaning of the word translated faith in the New Testament is really more than belief and more than trust. To have faith is to be persuaded of something. When I was taking a persuasive speaking course we were taught that there is a big difference between somebody acknowledging something and being persuaded of it. Someone who gives mere assent to the truth of something does not feel the need to take action. One who is persuaded that it is true takes appropriate action because the fact becomes personal. You can convince somebody that a particular car is the best on the road. They may not buy it. You persuade someone that the same car is the best for him, he will buy and will survive the buyer’s remorse that always comes shortly after the purchase.

Many people in the church (assembly, called-out group) are convinced that Jesus is the Son of God and the savior of the world. They claim to have faith, and on the basis of their faith they may watch a religious program on Sunday, or even attend an assembly. When somebody asks

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them what church they belong to they are happy to give an answer. But when “when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word” or “the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches” (Matt 13:21-22) come along, his faith does not translate into action. When one has faith—when one is persuaded—he will remain steadfast in the face of persecution. He will not only answer questions about his faith, but will volunteer the information freely.

“For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” (2 Tim 1:12) This is what is meant by the church word we call faith.

There is nothing wrong with using church words. When they are properly understood they are valid shorthand for biblical concepts. When talking to the unchurched, however, sometimes these words get in the way. People have one concept of what is meant by church (sitting through a boring sermon) or faith, and would be better persuaded if we used common words. They would then understand what they are being asked to buy into.

I HATE HIM

King Ahab was an ordinary man. OK. Maybe not altogether ordinary. He and his wife, Isabella (Jezebel in the King James Version and subsequent English versions) are held up as the epitome of evil. With the possible exceptions of Haman and Adolf Hitler, Ahab has the reputation as the wickedest man ever. But in some ways he was an ordinary man. Like all of us, he was a bundle of contradictions. Perhaps this is most obvious in his dealings with a prophet named Micaiah. (1 Kings 22)

Ahab did not know how to react to Micaiah. He tells Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, that he hates this man. "His offence, honesty!" (*King Lear*, I, ii) How like a human being. There is a stereotype of a woman asking her husband to tell her honestly if a particular garment makes her look fat. The husband does not know how to answer. If he says yes, she hates him for telling the truth. If he lies, she knows, and gets mad at him for lying. Typically this is told of women, but Ahab shows that men are no different.

Ahab and Jehoshaphat are about to go to war. Jehoshaphat insists that they consult the prophets of God first. Ahab gathers four hundred of his prophets, who all tell him what he wants to hear. Jehoshaphat asks if there is not another prophet. Ahab says there is, "But I hate him, because he never prophesies good concerning me, but only evil." He will tell the truth, and I don't want to hear the truth. I can't handle the truth.

So Micaiah comes and lies to Ahab. He says Ahab will be victorious. All will go as the others prophets have said. For once he tells Ahab what he wants to hear. And what is Ahab's reaction? "How

many times shall I adjure thee that thou tell me nothing but that which is true in the name of the LORD?" Poor Micaiah. He can't seem to get it right. Ahab hates him for telling the truth, and yells at him for lying.

What can Micaiah do but tell the truth? God says that Ahab will die in battle. You want the truth, O king. God wants you to go into battle so that you will die. Now that I've obeyed you can I go home?

So now Ahab turns to Jehoshaphat and says, "Did I not tell you he never prophesies good about me?" What do you want, Ahab? The truth or a lie? Neither. Ahab wants to look like he knows what he is doing.

And in that, Ahab shows his humanity. You see, Jehoshaphat, I am the king. I know when someone is telling the truth and when someone is lying. And what good is this prophet, anyway? He can't make up his mind what to tell me. I might as well just do what I intended in the first place.

We can use the same tortuous reasoning to justify doing what we want to do. Look at all those hypocrites in the church. I had better not associate with them. Instead I will step all over people on my way up the corporate ladder. Paul talks about faith instead of legalism; James says faith without works is dead. Can't these guys agree on anything? I don't believe baptism is for the forgiveness of sin, so I'll call the book of James a "book of straw" and remove it from my Bible.

Yes, Ahab was an ordinary man. But if he was ordinary, why don't we strive to be extraordinary? Instead of saying "I told you so," maybe we should just stick with "God told me so."

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