WHEN LORD DOESN'T MEAN LORD

Posted on February 19, 2018 by Eddie

Bible translation can be quite complicated, you know!
Category: Observations

I recently came across a really interesting blog post on the Old Testament name for God, which is well worth a read.

The post included the following table, which I found fascinating. I realise that translating the Old Testament names for God isn't everyone's cup of tea, but stick with me on this for a wee while.

The first two columns contain information which is found in the introductory pages of most English Bibles and explains the conventions that are used to render Hebrew terms into English. The problem is that Hebrew has a number of words that translate into English as Lord, but English has only the one word. So, LORD (in small caps) is used to represent YHWH (Yahweh, or Jehovah) and other terms are captured using Lord with or without an initial capital depending on whether the word is focussing on God, or or human 'lords'.

So far, none of this was new to me (I've spent too much time reading the introductions to Bibles. I once actually gave a devotional talk based on the translator's introduction to the NIV - but that's another story). Where this gets really interesting is in the following two columns.

What many people don't realise is that the Bible that was in common use in Jesus' day was not the Hebrew text, but a translation into Greek called the Septuagint. This means that when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament, it tends to quote the Greek version, not the Hebrew text. For the vast majority of the time, this makes no difference. However, when it comes to the names of God, Greek, like English only has one wordÂ *kurios* or 'lord' to represent a number of Hebrew terms. However, Greek, unlike English doesn't do clever things with capital letters to help distinguish between the Hebrew terms. So a number of different words in Hebrew are all rendered asÂ *kurios* when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament. Some of the breadth of meaning is flattened out in the quotes.

Reflecting this, English translations of the New Testament go with the Greek text and translate all of the examples ofÂ *kurios* as 'Lord'.

It's starting to get a little complicated now, stick with me.

So, YHWH in Hebrew is translated as 'LORD' in the English Old Testament, but when the same word is quoted in the New Testament it is rendered as 'Lord' to reflect the Greek translation of the Hebrew which was actually quoted.

Similarly,Â *adoni* which tends to mean a 'human lord' would be rendered as 'lord' in the Old Testament, but 'Lord' in the New.

Hebrew uses different words for God and for human masters, and this is represented by different typography in our Old Testaments. However, Greek doesn't use different words, so when the Old Testament is quoted in the New these distinctions are lost. This bit was new to me and I found it fascinating.

However, there is one further step that really got my mind working. Sue pointed out to me that a number of languages that she has worked on can't use the same word 'lord' for God and for human masters. They are more like Hebrew in this respect than Greek. This means that when you are translating the New Testament, you can't simply translate the wordÂ *kurios* in quotes from the Old Testament, you have to dig back into the Old Testament, itself, to see what the original term was and then translate that appropriately.

English translations manage to get the best of both worlds. By clever use of typography, they can illustrate the difference between different Hebrew terms and then, because English and Greek are relatively similar, they can echo the Greek usage when the NT quotes the OT. Other languages can't do this.

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