

The Kingdom of God is Within (Among) (in the Midst of) You

by

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At no time in history have there been more vernacular translations of the Bible available to the public. The Christian reader has an unprecedented variety of English language translations and paraphrasings from which to choose.¹ The choices of most readers are probably made on the basis of factors no more important than aesthetics, e.g., whether one appreciates the stately prose of the King James or Douay-Rheims Version or the colloquial ease-of-reading of one or another of the more contemporary translations. Some preferences, however, are based on more substantive criteria. It is said, for example, that many “evangelical” Christians show a preference for the New International Version among the more contemporary translations, whereas many “liberal” Christians may show a preference for the inclusive language of the New Revised Standard Version. If this phenomenon is real, it is doubtless a reflection of doctrinal differences. One of the most significant doctrinal differences, albeit not necessarily between so-called liberal and so-called evangelical Christians, finds its expression in the ἐντός (entos) controversy.

Ἐντός (Entos) is a Greek preposition, meaning . . . well, that is the crux of the problem. The most significant passage in which the preposition ἐντός appears in the original Greek text of the New Testament is Luke 17:21. The King James Version translates verses 20 and 21 as

1 The list is lengthy. After the King James Version came out in 1611, it was quite some time before another English version appeared on the scene. The English Revised Version was published in 1885. Then came the American Standard Version in 1901, followed by the Moffatt Bible in 1924, the Smith-Goodspeed Bible in 1927, the Revised Standard Version in 1952, the Berkeley Bible in 1959, the New English Bible in 1970, the New American Standard Bible in 1971, the Living Bible also in 1971, the New International Version in 1978, the Good News Bible in 1979, and the New Revised Standard Version in 1989. (The dates listed here are the dates of fully completed publication. Most of the versions listed here appeared in portions at earlier dates.) The Roman Catholic reader has a similar variety to choose among. The Douay-Rheims version was completed in 1610 (making it older than the King James), followed by a Challoner revision in 1750, the Knox Bible in 1949, the Jerusalem Bible in 1966, the New American Bible in 1970, and the New Jerusalem Bible in 1985. The Revised Standard Version is also widely used by Roman Catholic readers. There are, of course, other partial translations (of one Testament or the other), but they are omitted from this listing for brevity's sake.

follows:

And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the Kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation:

Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for behold, the Kingdom of God is within (ἐντός) you.

The King James Version translates ἐντός as “within”, as does the Douay-Rheims,² and this translation would seem to be unremarkable to those familiar with the many transliterations of ἐντός into the English language. Ἐντός has entered into English as a prefix, “ento-” or “endo-“, meaning “within” or “inner” or “inside”, e.g., “entoderm” (sometimes “endoderm”, meaning the inner layer of skin), or “endogenous (meaning originating from within), or “endocrine (meaning secreting internally, or within). Thus “within” would seem to be a fairly obvious translation of ἐντός. Several of the newer English versions, however, have taken to translating ἐντός in Luke 17:21 as “among” or “in the midst of”. The difference in meaning may seem subtle to some, but it roughly parallels a particular difference in doctrinal emphasis “within” Christianity or “among” Christians. Some Christians tend to look “within”, in the Christian’s own heart, for God’s presence and God’s Kingdom, whereas other Christians looks for God’s presence and His Kingdom in the world, “among” Christians acting together for social betterment. The Revised Standard Version has Christ telling us that the Kingdom of God is “in the midst of you”³ and the New Revised Standard Version has Christ telling us that it is “among you”. The New International Version, however, has returned to the “within you” of the older King James and Douay-Rheims Versions.

The correct location of the Kingdom of God would seem to be an issue central to

² The Douay-Rheims Version translates Luke 17:20 and 21 as follows:

And being asked by the Pharisees, when the Kingdom of God should come? he answered then and said: The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation:

Neither shall they say: Behold here, or behold there. For lo, the Kingdom of God is within you.

³ The “in the midst of you” translation has a connotation that may appeal to many Christians. The thought is that Jesus is identifying the Kingdom of God with Himself; He (Jesus) is in their midst. This connotation is somewhat problematic, however, in that Jesus has just told His audience that the Kingdom of God does not come with observation, and He (Jesus) was certainly observable to His listeners.

Christian theology – so central, in fact, that a resolution of the ἐντός question is imperative, if Christians are truly to be one body of believers. Perhaps the easiest, and maybe the most attractive, resolution of the meaning of ἐντός would be to suggest that all three translations are correct: that the Kingdom of God is both “within” the deep recesses of the Christian’s heart and “among” or “in the midst of” Christians working for God in the world. One might think that the Holy Spirit deliberately breathed into the mind of Luke an ambiguous word, so that both connotations might be thought of as being correct. That resolution, however, attractive as it may be to some, begs the question of whether ἐντός truly is an ambiguous word. The purpose of this article is to explore the meaning of the Greek preposition ἐντός primarily from a semantic vantage point. The exploration will necessarily involve some theological inference, but it is hoped that theological preference is avoided.

What does ἐντός mean? The first thought one has is that “within” and “among” are such common prepositions in English that ἐντός must also have been a commonly used preposition in the New Testament. Unfortunately that is not true. Ἐντός actually appears only twice throughout the entire Greek text of the New Testament: in the passage just discussed, and also in Matthew 23:26. The Matthew 23:26 usage of ἐντός occurs in a long list of “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees” admonitions. Along with verse 25, the King James Version reads:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the
platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within
(ἐντός) the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be
clean also.

Quite obviously ἐντός in the above quotation cannot be rendered as “among”. It only makes sense as “within” or some synonym such as “inside”. Also, the careful reader will notice that there are two “withins” in the quotation. Ἐντός is the original Greek for the second of the two: “within the cup and platter”. The first “within” is actually an adverbial form, and not the preposition; in the original Greek the word first translated as “within”, i.e., “within they are full of . . .” is ἐσωθεν (esothēn), an adverb meaning “inwardly”. But as to the ἐντός word, “*within* the cup and platter” – one is hard pressed to suggest that it somehow could be translated as “*among* the cup and platter”.

Moreover, an analysis of the meaning of the adverb ἐσωθεν may well result in some light being shed on the meaning of the preposition ἐντός. This is so because ἐσωθεν is linguistically related to ἐντός. At the time the New Testament was being written, ἐσωθεν was a relatively recent word form. It does not appear in earlier dialects. Instead its precursor “ἐντοσθεν (entosthen)” appears and is widely used in the earlier Greek, most notably in Homeric Greek. The earlier adverb ἐντοσθεν, which had dropped out of use by the time of the writing of the New Testament (it appears nowhere in the Bible), has much more of an obvious semantic connection with the preposition ἐντός than does its linguistic descendant ἐσωθεν, but the connection between

the newer ἔσωθεν and ἐντός seems nonetheless real. In the less disciplined earlier dialects of Greek, ἐντοσθεν was often written as “ἐντοσθε” or as “ἐντοθεν”. It may have been a combination of ἐντος and “τόθι”, τόθι itself being an adverb meaning “there”. Ἐντοθεν or ἐντοσθεν thus meant something like “within there”.

There is another possible derivation of the adverb ἔσωθεν. The particle “-θεν” was widely used as a suffix signifying “place where”. “Ἐσω” may have been a contracted form of the preposition εἰσω, which in turn was built on the simpler preposition εἰς. Εἰς meant “into”. Εἰσω or ἔσω meant “into” also, but with more of a directional sense, e.g., in the sense of “towards within”.⁴ Thus, even in this understanding of the derivation of ἔσωθεν, ἔσωθεν seems to mean something like “within there” or “towards there”.

If, through ἐντοσθεν, the adverb ἔσωθεν is linguistically related to ἐντός, then the various usages of ἔσωθεν throughout the New Testament will give indications of the correct meaning of ἐντός. Ἐσωθεν appears thirteen times in the New Testament, invariably in contexts in which it can only mean “inside” or “within” or “inward” – never “among”. A typical reference occurs in Mark 7:21:

For from within (ἔσωθεν), out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders.

Another occurs in 2nd Corinthians 4:16:

For which cause we faint not, but though our outward man perish, yet the inward (ἔσωθεν) man is renewed day by day.

In none of the thirteen references does ἔσωθεν seem able to be translated with contextual sense as “among” or any of its adverbial equivalents. The other usages of ἔσωθεν occur in Matthew 7:15, 23:27, and 23:28; Mark 7:23; Luke 11:7, 11:39, and 11:40; 2d Corinthians 7:5; and Revelation 4:8 and 5:1.

Those verses referred to earlier from Matthew 23 (the ones in which both ἐντός and ἔσωθεν appear) also help shed some light on the meaning of ἐντός from another vantage point. In both verses, we see the word “within” juxtaposed with the term “outside of”: “. . . ye make

⁴ This is the explanation of Georg Autenrieth in his *Homeric Dictionary* (Harper & Brothers, 1876).

clean the *outside* of the cup and of the platter, but *within* they are full of extortion and excess.” Juxtaposed contrasting words can be shown to be related in the sense of antonyms, e.g., “inside/outside” or “within/without”. The original Greek for “outside of” is ἐκτός. Ἐντός and ἐκτός are antonyms in much the same style as “within” and “without” or “inside” and “outside” are antonyms. There is a similar juxtaposition of antonyms in verse 25, where the adverbial usages of “within” and “outside of” appear. There, “ἐξῶθεν” is juxtaposed with ἔσωθεν in the original Greek.

If ἐντός is used so very seldom in the Greek New Testament, might its antonym ἐκτός be, perhaps, used a little more frequently? Ἐκτός is indeed used somewhat more frequently, appearing five times. In addition to the reference we have already seen in Matthew 23:26, ἐκτός is used in Acts 26:22, 1st Corinthians 6:18, 1st Corinthians 15:2, and 1st Corinthians 15:27. In the Acts 26:22 reference, Paul uses ἐκτός to express something like “other than” or “else”, in the sense of exclusion as opposed to inclusion:

Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than (ἐκτός) those which the prophets and Moses did say should come.

This usage of ἐκτός would seem to suggest that the “ἐντός / ἐκτός” paradigm can be understood in the sense of “inclusion/exclusion”, which does in turn seem to suggest “among/not among” at least as strongly as “within/without”. The last cited usage of ἐκτός (in 1st Corinthians 15:27) raises the same suggestion:

For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted (ἐκτός), which did put all things under him.

The King James Version here translates ἐκτός as “excepted”. The completely literal translation makes it clear that ἐκτός conveys that same sense of “other than” or exclusion. Literally, the last sentence of the quoted verse would read something like this: But when he says that all things have been put under (his feet, it is) manifest that (he means all things) *other than* the (one) having put all things under himself. Again, the “exclusion/inclusion” paradigm inherent in the usage of a word signifying “other than” seems to fit both the “within/without” and the “among/not among” paradigms.

Another usage of ἐκτός (the one found in 1st Corinthians 15:2) seems even less helpful for our purposes. There ἐκτός is used as part of an idiomatic phrase (“ἐκτός εἰ μὴ”) which literally means (using both our alternatives) “without if not” or “not among if not”, and which is conveniently translated as “unless”.

The final usage of ἐκτός (the one in 1st Corinthians 6:18), however, seems consistent

with the unambiguous usage that we found in Matthew 23:26, where ἐκτός meant “without” or “outside” as opposed to “within” or “inside”. In the King James Version, 1st Corinthians 6:18 reads:

Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is
without (ἐκτός) the body; but he that committeth
fornication sinneth against his own body.

“Without” or “ἐκτός” in that sentence can only mean “not within” or “not inside”. It cannot with contextual sense be understood as meaning “not among”.

This analysis of the usages of ἐκτός suggests the possibility that ἐντός, its antonym, might in some contexts convey the sense of “among”, but in truth it is only a bare possibility, because in those few instances in which ἐκτός appears amenable to the translation “not among”, it appears equally amenable to the translation “not within”. So, what conclusion are we to draw at this point in our inquiry? Tentatively at least, it would seem that, whereas ἐντός can be understood as meaning “among”, in the sense that it is the antonym of ἐκτός which has occasionally been used in situations in which it can be understood as meaning “not among” (though not exclusively so), by far the better interpretation (thus far) is that ἐντός means “within” or “inside” in Luke 17:21. The only other usage of ἐντός in the New Testament occurs in a passage in which it can only be translated as “within” or “inside” (Matthew 23:26), and its antonym ἐκτός, while at times amenable to both interpretations (“without” and “not among”) is never used in a passage in which it can *only* be translated as “not among” and in fact is used in two passages in which it can *only* be translated as “without” or “outside”. At this point, it does seem at this point in our analysis that the Kingdom of God is more *within* us than *among* us. But to give a semantic answer – even a tentative one – is not necessarily to capture the full meaning of a word, especially its meaning in the context of so important a scriptural passage. Our trek continues.

The simple semantic meaning of a word is often devoid of nuances that may well have been intended by the original author, and sometimes ignoring the nuances can lead to overly simplistic understandings of meaning. If we were to settle on the translation of ἐντός as “among”, for example, it is not difficult to surmise that the passage may well indicate that Jesus was advocating a works gospel: the Kingdom of God exists “among” Christians united and working together for human betterment. Similarly, but at the other end of the spectrum, if we were to settle on the translation of ἐντός simply as “within” or “inside” without further nuances, we might be suggesting that the Kingdom of God exists only within some form of sterile and narcissistic self-analysis, or some form of good or warm feelings. The question, of course, remains whether there are nuances that we haven’t yet taken into account.

The careful reader may have noted that we have dealt with only two alternatives thusfar: ἐντός, as “within” or “inside” and ἐντός as “among”. We have mentioned but not investigated another possible meaning: ἐντός as “in the midst of”. The first thought may be that “in the midst of” is pretty much synonymous with “among”, and thus we need not have considered it as a

separate alternative. The Revised Standard Version actually uses “in the midst of” in its translation of the Luke 17:21 passage. Only slightly different – but perhaps enough so to add a nuance – is the New American Standard Version’s “in your midst”. Do the “in your midst” connotations inform the meaning of ἐντός? One somewhat tenuous argument for the translation of ἐντός as “in the midst of” is the fact that as a preposition ἐντός takes the genitive case (the word most frequently translated as “among”, i.e. “ἐν”, takes the dative case). The genitive case, however, also makes sense in English in the context of the “within” meaning. A synonym for “within” is “inside”. If we were to use the adverb “inside” in a prepositional phrase, we would, to be grammatically correct, have to use the expression “inside of” – a genitive construction. Thus, even if we were to allow the fact that ἐντός takes the genitive case to inform its meaning, we are not necessarily budged from our tentative conclusion that ἐντός means “within” or “inside”. And yet “in the midst of” is also a plausible genitive form. It is yet possible that “in the midst of” might somehow express the meaning of ἐντός, perhaps more clearly or more fully. Again, our trek continues.

Our search thus far has, with obvious good reason, been confined to the New Testament. One can not, of course, expect to find the word ἐντός in the Old Testament, since the original text of the Old Testament is in Hebrew, not Greek. But as God is the author of both, we might expect to find a Hebrew word carrying the same meaning as ἐντός, and perhaps that Hebrew word will have helpful connotations and nuances, such that it might inform the meaning of ἐντός across the languages, as it were.

Perhaps the best candidate for the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word ἐντός is קרב (qereb)”, and at first glance it may seem that a קרב connection argues for an ambiguous meaning of ἐντός, because קרב is often translated as “among” as well as “in the midst of” and “within”. But what may be significant is that the scholars who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek in the Septuagint of the third and second centuries B.C. seem to have chosen ἐντός as the correct translation of קרב in those contexts which convey the sense of “within” exclusively. Most notable are Psalms 39:3-4, 103:1, and 109:22; and Isaiah 16:11 – “My heart was hot within (קרב) me Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within (קרב) me, bless his holy name. . . . For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within (קרב) me Wherefore my bowels shall sound like an harp for Moab and my inward (קרב) parts for Kirharesh.” Each of those usages of קרב is an ἐντός in the Septuagint. Thus the Septuagint scholars seem to have understood ἐντός as conveying the sense of “within” or “inside of”.

קרב (qereb), literally means “the nearest part of”, i.e., “the center”. It is derived from “קרב (qarab – same consonants, different vowel markings)” meaning “to approach” or “to come near to”, and it is the root word קרב (qarab) that Moses used in Deuteronomy 30:14. The quotation in context begins at Deuteronomy 30:11:

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven, that thou shouldst say, Who

shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us,
that we may hear it, and do it?
Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldst
say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it
unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?

But the word is very nigh (קרוב) unto thee, in
thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

The Promised Land is, of course, an Old Testament “type” of the New Testament “Kingdom of God”, and the quoted language is remarkable in that in it Moses draws the connection between the physical Promised Land and an internal state of mind. He even speaks of circumcision of the heart in verse 6, presaging Paul’s insight in Romans 2:29. In it Moses conditions the physical joys of the Promised Land on obedience to God’s commands – not the commands which are far off in heaven or beyond the sea, but the “word” that is in the heart.

The conceptual connection between the Kingdom of God as an indwelling presence of God in the heart and the Promised Land of the Israelites is, perhaps, nowhere clearer than in Ezekiel 36:26-28:

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit
will I put within (קרוב) you: and I will take away
the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you
an heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within (קרוב) you, and
cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my
judgments, and do them.

And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your
fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your
God.

In another passage, קרוב (qereb) was actually translated by the King James scholars as “in heart”. The usage occurs in Jeremiah 9:8.

Their tongue is as an arrow shot out; it speaketh
deceit; one speaketh peaceably to his neighbor with

his mouth, but in heart (קרב) he layeth his wait.

If קרב (qereb) does inform the meaning of ἐντός, then, it would seem fair to conclude that ἐντός does indeed mean “within”, but in a far richer sense than “inside one’s thoughts or feelings”. It means something like “inside the core of one’s very being, the center of one’s heart”.

Counterarguments, of course, have been made for the connotation of “among” or “in the midst of”, but they tend, to some extent at least, to be based more on theological preference than on semantic analysis.⁵ Theological preference aside, analyses of the simple meanings of the preposition ἐντός, its adverbial counterparts, its antonym, and its Septuagint usages in the Old Testament leave little doubt but that the Kingdom of God is “within” us, and provide scant support for the notion that the Kingdom is to be understood as being “among” us. There may be reason to suggest that those translations of ἐντός as “in the midst of” are not too far off the mark – except that they usually imply the wrong “midst”. Again, the foregoing analyses, including the information gleaned from the Septuagint usages of קרב (qereb), suggest that the Kingdom of God is “in the midst of” or “in the center of” the human heart. It is to be sought not simply “within” us but rather at the core of our very being.

⁵ The counterarguments are well summarized in the Anchor Bible volume on Luke’s Gospel, in the material accompanying Luke 17:20 and 21. One seemingly strong argument, not based on theological preference, but rather on contextual analysis, is that Jesus spoke the Luke 17:21 words to Pharisees, and it seems unlikely that Jesus would be saying that the Kingdom of God resides deep in the hearts of the Pharisees. But in truth that argument fails even on its own level (aside from the fact that, if accepted, it likewise jettisons the “among” connotation – it is equally difficult to envision the Kingdom of God as existing “among” the Pharisees). Jesus was indeed speaking to Pharisees, as he often did. And time and again his admonition to the Pharisees (well exemplified in the other passage in which ἐντός is used, i.e., Matthew 23:26, as well as throughout the Gospels) is that they are betraying the Covenant by focusing only on outward appearances and neglecting the inner reality. Jesus was telling the Pharisees where, i.e., in what locale, the Kingdom can be found. It is sometimes thought that Jesus had an exclusively condemnatory and not a salvational attitude towards Pharisees, but this is, of course, belied in the accounts of the calling of Saul of Tarsus and others.