

One is your Father in heaven or One is your Father, he who is in heaven?

Mt 23:9: καὶ πατέρα μὴ καλέσητε ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, εἷς γάρ ἐστιν ὑμῶν ὁ πατήρ ὁ οὐράνιος

Translated literally, this text says: “And call no one your father on earth, for one is your heavenly Father”.

Accordingly, this verse has often been misunderstood. Thus, the New American Bible renders it: “Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven”. This translation excludes that possibility that Christians might have more than one Father in heaven—as if such an idea had been at all entertained. The Rheims and the KJV are not thoroughly satisfying either: Rheims: “And call none your father upon earth; for one is your father, who is in heaven” and KJV: “And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven”. The NIV has tried to better the translation by writing: “And do not call anyone on earth ‘father’, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven”.

The articular adjective in ὁ πατήρ ὁ οὐράνιος could in a different context have functioned as an attributive adjective “the father the heavenly one”, i.e. “the heavenly father”. Here, however, the two articular words ought to have been separated by a comma, thus: εἷς γάρ ἐστιν ὑμῶν ὁ πατήρ, ὁ οὐράνιος = “for one is your Father, [namely] the heavenly One / the one in heaven”. In other words, ὁ οὐράνιος is in apposition to ὁ πατήρ, explaining who this Father is.

Of the English translations the New Revised Standard Version and the New American Bible have hit the nail on its head: NRSV: “And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven” and NAB: “And do no call anyone on earth your father: for One is your Father, He who is in heaven”.

The way this text is punctuated in the present critical edition of the NT gives an un-Greek text: “for one is your heavenly Father”. Matthew no doubt meant: εἷς γάρ ἐστιν ὑμῶν ὁ πατήρ, ὁ οὐράνιος “For one is your Father, [namely] the one who / He who is in heaven”.