

What Did the Ten Wise Virgins Say to their Unwise Counterparts?

On being asked to share their oil with the unwise virgins, the wise ones answer: μήποτε οὐ μὴ ἀρκέση ἡμῖν καὶ ὑμῖν (Mat 25:9). Guided by what they take to be the sense of the passage more modern English translations render as follows: NASB: “No, there will not be enough for us and for you”; NAB: “No, for there may not be enough for us and you”; NRSV: “No! there will not be enough for you and for us” and the NIV: “«No»” they replied, «there may not be enough for both us and you». These translations have taken the adverb μήποτε as the equivalent of μή = ‘No’.

The KJV translates “Not so; lest there be no enough for us and you”, while the Rheims Version has: “Lest perhaps there be not enough for us and for you”.

The Standard Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament by Bauer-Danker (BDAG) gives four main meanings, placing our Matthew text under the last of these: “Sometimes the negation is weakened to such a degree that μήποτε introduces something conjectured **probably, perhaps**”. For support here he cites Aristoteles, *Nikomacheian Ethics* 10, 1 [μήποτε δὲ οὐ καλῶς τοῦτο λέγεται “Perhaps, however, this is not well said”]; 10 [not found]; Marcus Antoninus [= Marcus Aurelius] 4, 24 [μήποτε ἄμεινον τὰναγκαῖα πράσσειν ...; “Is it not better to do (only) what is necessary?”]; Job 1:5 [ἔλεγεν γὰρ Ἰωβ Μήποτε οἱ υἱοί μου ... κακὰ ἐνενόησαν πρὸς Θεόν “just in case my sons had bad thoughts against God”]; Sirach 19:13f.; Philon, *Sacrifice of Abel* 72 [μήποτε διὰ τούτην τὴν αἰτίαν; “Was it perhaps for this reason?”]; *The worse attacks the better* 168 [μήποτ’ οὖν ὃ βούλεται παριστάνειν ἐστὶ τοιόνδε “in case/lest/perhaps the thought he wants to convey is something like the following”] and proceeds with citing the New Testament text with this meaning, i.e. Mt 25:9 v.l. μήποτε οὐκ ἀρκέση interpreting it by “perhaps there might not be enough”. He further notes that “The tone is sharper in the wording of the text μήποτε οὐ μὴ ἀρκέση certainly there would never be enough”. Danker, has, however, overlooked the fact that Matthew’s text is constructed differently to the ancient Greek texts.

Δ. Δημητράκου, *Λεξικὸν ὅλης τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Γλώσσης*, Vol. VI, p. 4675 gives three main meanings: (1) ‘never (ever)’, ‘in no way’, ‘under no circumstances’; (2) ‘perhaps’ citing *i.a.* Aristoteles, *Nikomacheian Ethics* 1172a, 33 and Gen 24:5; and (3) as a conjunction = μήπως ‘lest’, ‘in case’, exemplifying with Homeros, *Odysseia* XXI, 324: μή ποτέ τις εἴπησι “lest/in case some one might say ...”

If we take our passage as one sentence, “lest/in case it will not be enough for us and for you, go to those who sell ...” we would have had a different Greek text: μήποτε οὐκ ἀρκέσει ἡμῖν καὶ ὑμῖν, πορεύεσθε πρὸς τοὺς πωλοῦντας. The double negation οὐ μή as well as μᾶλλον render such a translation very unlikely. The μᾶλλον makes the second part unlikely as the main clause with the first part as its subordinate clause. Had it been so, the form it would have taken would be the suggested sentence, above.

There is a certain skewing here between the conjunction expressing “doubt” (μήποτε = μήπως) and the strengthened double negation οὐ μή. The two do not collocate harmoniously. Either the ten prudent girls are certain about the oil not being enough, in which case they say οὐ μή: οὐ μή ἀρκέσει ἡμῖν καὶ ὑμῖν. Πορεύεσθε μᾶλλον πρὸς τοὺς πωλοῦντας ..., or they are uncertain, in which case they say: μήποτε (= μήπως): μήποτε οὐκ ἀρκέσει ἡμῖν καὶ ἡμῖν, πορεύεσθε πρὸς τοὺς πωλοῦντας ...

The strengthened negation οὐ μή would hint that the girls were certain. In this case, the μήποτε (= μήπως) does not sit comfortably.

That Matthew has not expressed himself as a Greek would is fairly obvious. The question is: “What did he mean?” “What did he want to say?”

Perhaps Matthew intended to underline the certainty of the prudent girls that the oil would fail and used μήποτε in a more basic way: ‘Never!’, ‘In no way!’, thus: “Never! It will not be enough for us and for you. Go (rather) to those who sell ...” This might well be the way in which Matthew intended the girls’ answer. Had this text been written by a Greek, he would undoubtedly have added the conjunction γάρ, thus: Μήποτε! οὐ γὰρ ἀρκέσει / (μὴ) ἀρκέσει ἡμῖν τε καὶ ὑμῖν. Πορεύεσθε μᾶλλον πρὸς τοὺς πωλοῦντας ...

This is most likely the way in which Matthew intended his un-Greek construction.