

DIFFICULT WORDS AND PHRASES

This contribution is based on an unpublished article in Dutch by J. L. Swellengrebel. D. H. W.

The Hebrew word *yada'* and the Greek word *ginôskô*, both used in the Bible to mean 'know' in the sense of having sexual intercourse, give some difficulty in languages which do not use the word 'know' in this sense, for example in the translation of Luke 1:34.

Before one can decide on the most suitable rendering, there are certain other factors which should be borne in mind:

1. In the Old Testament the picture of marriage is often used to illustrate the relationship of God to his people, that relationship in which He desires, in his grace, intimate fellowship with them. It is therefore desirable that the translation chosen should be capable of this spiritual meaning in other contexts.

2. It appears from various passages in the Old Testament that *yada'* was an appropriate specific term for sexual experience whether within or without wedlock (cf Gen. 38:24; Judges 19:25), or whether natural or perverted (cf. Gen. 19:5).

3. The word *ginôskô* is used with special sexual significance not only in the New Testament and Septuagint, but also in various Greek writers who are unlikely to have been influenced by the Septuagint, such as Callimachus, Menander, Heraclides and Plutarch, authors ranging thus from the third century before Christ to the second century A.D.

It appears, therefore, that the word or phrase required in translation must if possible be a sufficiently definite specific term, and yet capable of the spiritual meaning required in other contexts. It must, of course, also be void of unsuitable connotations which would be vulgar or incongruous. This seems to be a tall order!

Of course every translator must solve this problem for himself, but it is often useful to know how the problem has been dealt with in another language. In Dutch the old 'States General' Version used *bekennen*, which is formed from the root *kennen* 'to know' and the prefix *be-* which has a kind of 'perfective' or more precisely 'inchoative' force. In Mediaeval usage this word had the required specific sexual denotation, and also the connection with the ordinary word for 'know' which could be used to bring out associations with the fact that the Lord 'knew' His people, while they did not 'know' Him (cf. Is. 1:3). However, this word has now completely lost this denotation, except for readers familiar with the archaic language of the old version. In the New Dutch Version, therefore, another rendering was chosen, namely *gemeenschap hebben*, which means literally 'have fellowship with'; this is a common term in Dutch answering to the English 'have intercourse with', but it also has a much wider, less specialized meaning, as will be understood from

the fact that the same phrase is used for ordinary Christian fellowship. It is therefore also extremely suitable for raising associations with God's desire for fellowship with His people. None the less, objection to this rendering has been made, on the ground that the formal association with *kennen* 'to know' has been lost; those of this opinion would have preferred the translators to retain the word *bekennen* in its archaic usage. This, of course, is the kind of difficulty with which every revision meets; it should not be brushed aside without consideration, but such abnormal archaic usages should not be employed in modern speech revisions without great justification. In this case the translators of the New Dutch Version have, in the authors' opinion, made the right choice.

READERS' CORNER

From J. Harold Greenlee

I have just been reading the fine article "Hymn Translating", by Elaine T. Lewis, in the April 1960 issue of *The Bible Translator*. I am only an interested layman on such matters, and I make bold to comment on one point only: I believe that a misplaced semicolon has kept Mrs. Lewis from seeing that the verse of "Silent Night" which she quoted is a perfectly good literary and grammatical, as well as beautiful, rendering, although I would grant that its meaning might not be grasped at first reading by everyone, even without the offending semicolon (following "light").

May I give an "expanded translation" to show what I have for many years assumed is the meaning of this verse? The explanatory words are in parentheses or brackets:

"(This is a) silent night, (it is a) holy night. (Oh) Son of God, love's pure light (which is) radiant (now) beams from thy holy face. (It thus beams together) with the dawn of redeeming grace, (oh) Jesus, Lord, (and all this takes place) at thy birth."

As an alternative to "(which is) radiant", the word "radiant" can be taken for "radiantly", well within the limits of poetic licence.
