

Problems in Zapotec Translation

Otis M. Leal

Zapotec of southern Mexico presents some very interesting problems for the Bible translator.

Problems Regarding Grammatical Categories

In the first place there are problems because grammatical categories present distinctions which are not present in Greek, Spanish, or English, the languages we use in making the translation. Typical of these is the fact that repetition versus doing an act only once is an essential category in most verbs. Thus one form of the verb indicates that the action is done for the first time. A second form indicates that it is repeated after having been done previously. There is no form which leaves in doubt whether it was done previously or not. A prefix added to the repetitive form may indicate that the action has been repeated frequently, but this frequentative prefix is not obligatory. Some examples of how it works out follow.

In Verbs of Motion

In Mark 1 : 16 Christ walks by the Sea of Galilee. Had he ever walked by the Sea of Galilee before? If so, the repetitive must be used. In Mark 8 : 10 the same question must be answered regarding Dalmanutha. In the former case, He had been at Capernaum previously and we may have some confidence that He had previously walked by the sea. In the latter case, Dalmanutha is nowhere else mentioned in the New Testament, but from its location, apparently on the west of the Sea of Galilee, it seems more probable that this was not His first time there. Therefore, the repetitive is used in these places.

In Mark 7 : 24 the Lord goes to Sidon. Here the informant wished to use the repetitive arguing that since He entered a house, He must have been there previously to have made friends. It seemed more probable, however, that He had never before visited those parts and therefore the non-repetitive was used.

A peculiar problem is presented by the word "come". In all of the above instances the Zapotec would say that He "went" rather than "came", but in Mark 8 : 38 where the second coming of Christ is referred to, the word "come" would be used. In line with ordinary usage one would expect a repetitive here since it is a second coming. The repetitive of the word "come", however, is restricted to returning to one's home. Since heaven in Christ's habitation, the non-repetitive form must be used here, although a phrase is attached to indicate that this is not the first time.

In Mark 9 : 33 Jesus is spoken of as "coming to Capernaum". Here the Zapotec would substitute the word "arrive" for "come". The choice must be made between two words. One means to "arrive at home". The second means "to arrive at a place other than home". In the case of the first, the home region must also be that of the narrator. Since presum-

ably Mark did not write his Gospel at Capernaum, the second word was selected. Since Christ had arrived in Capernaum on other occasions, the repetitive form of this second word was used.

In Verbs of Healing

In Mark 7 : 34 Christ commanded that the ears of a deaf man should be opened. The man also had a speech impediment. Here the question arises as to whether the man had been deaf and had had the speech impediment all his life. If so, the non-repetitive form would be used in all verbs referring to the healing. If there had been a time when the man had not been deaf, his ears would have previously been open and therefore the repetitive would be used. The same applies to the speech impediment. Here it is difficult to decide. The conjunction of deafness and speech impediment might seem to argue that this was a condition from birth. On the other hand, no point is made of the cure's being the more marvelous in that the man was so afflicted from birth. Lacking evidence but forced to choose, we here used the repetitive.

In Other Verbs

Illustrations might be multiplied regarding the difficulties in deciding whether each act is done for the first time or not, but one more will suffice. In Mark 1 : 9, Jesus went from Nazareth and was baptized of John. In Zapotec the sentence has little meaning without a definite statement to the effect that Christ's going was in order to meet John. Thus the verb "to go to meet" must be used. Next the question arises as to whether Christ had ever met John before. Lacking evidence one must merely guess.

Problems Regarding the Meanings of Words:

"Lord"

Four words are used for "lord" or "master". Of these, *mgwez*, a Spanish borrowing, means simply "a master worker", such as a carpenter, a mason, or the drill master for ceremonial dances. It would hardly be appropriate. The second, *maistr*, also a Spanish loan, means a "teacher" or "another who knows more than the ordinary man". This scarcely conveys the idea of "lord". A third Spanish loan, *senyor*, is used to convey respect, its usage being restricted to people of importance. It is, however, used only in direct address and then always includes the title of the person addressed, corresponding to the "mister" of "Mr. President" or "Mr. Chairman". The fourth word, *Xan*, is never used in direct address. It is grammatically "inalienable", i.e. it must always have an expressed possessor. In translation it has at times been possible to use *senyor*, though it has been necessary on occasion to use it in a way that violates the native pattern. The pressure of Spanish as the trade language makes this more acceptable to the informant than any other solution we have found. In a few places it has been found possible to use *Xan*. In still others where God is clearly meant, the only solution that has been found which is remotely acceptable to the native usage has been the substitution of "God" for "Lord".

“Baptize”

The Zapotecs know the practice of baptism and have a word to express it. There would thus seem to be no problem involved. Unfortunately, however, the word for “baptize” is a compound, one part being a word nowhere else used and the other part being the word for “water”. Perhaps “water-baptize” is the closest equivalent in English. For most contexts this presents no problem, but if the word is used in Mark 1 : 8, it would say, “He will water-baptize you with the Holy Ghost”. In Zapotec the idea is unintelligible. To meet the problem, the Spanish word *bautizar* was introduced at this point though the Zapotec word is ordinarily used. The disadvantages of this substitution are obvious, but no better solution was found.

“Ask”

In Mark 6 : 24 the daughter of Herodias, having been told by the king that she may have whatever she asks says to her mother, “What shall I ask?”. Four mutually exclusive forms of the question are possible. The first means that she knows already what her mother wants. In this case asking is a mere formality. The second means that she has never known and asks to be informed. The third means that she once knew what her mother wanted but has forgotten completely. The fourth means that she once knew what her mother wanted but has forgotten some of the details. Obviously choosing any one of the four is just guessing.

Problems Involving Zapotec Religious Beliefs: References to the Dead

Zapotecs never refer to a person who has died without indicating this fact. Thus the sentence, “John said” means that John is still alive. Otherwise it would be, “The defunct John said”. In Mark 9 : 4 Moses and Elijah spoke with Christ. Moses was obviously dead and was so designated in the translation. The question arose regarding Elijah. The informant was positive that he also should be referred to as dead since he no longer inhabited this mortal world. Should that be conceded, however, it would seem that Christ would also have to be referred to as dead at any time after the ascension. Thus Paul would be represented as beginning Romans, “Paul, a servant of the dead Jesus Christ”. But because of the resurrection of Jesus, He is always spoken of as alive.

“Having the Devil”

In Mark 3 : 22 the scribes said that Christ had Beelzebub. From the context it can be seen that they meant that His power was Satanic. The Zapotecs recognize power from the prince of the demons, but would never say that the person with that power “has Satan”. Instead they would say that he “talks with Satan”. To say a person “has Satan” means only that he has a filthy mouth, i.e. he uses filthy language, something of which the scribes would not dare accuse Jesus. Here clearly the meaning of the Scriptures is conveyed by the expression “talked with Beelzebub”. The translation was made accordingly.