

# THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

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## Notes on Translating the New Testament into New Caledonian

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### Part 2

It seems that translation difficulties continually increase. It is difficult to learn and to make precise distinctions in the native language. The native speech appears too inadequate to use in denoting abstractions and impossible to form satisfactory psychological terms. How then are we to aspire to make these people understand the most elevated religious concepts of the gospel, so that they can speak of them with words which spring from their hearts?

### Words without Meaning

Does one not often read in the accounts of missions the phrases of converted natives which seem stereotyped, following a "revivalism" style or representing the so-called "language of Canaan"? Do we not see in this a definite indication that these new Christians have not understood, but rather have just repeated and imitated, as they have been influenced?

This danger occurs in the work of those missionaries who give to their followers the gospel in the same words as they themselves have received it—translated and formulated by purely Occidental minds. They do not seek to translate this gospel into a language which the new Christians can understand, but they naively employ the method of authority. However, the fact that some missionaries have made such mistakes should not make the translator doubt the possibility of his work. There are many people who have demonstrated that a gospel though incompletely thought out, can be known and preached by them with power. Words which have a specifically religious and Christian sense can be translated.

In dealing with such religious terms, one should distinguish many classes:

### “Demon” and “Devil”

First of all, there are those words which in our European versions have been transposed directly from the Greek, e.g. “demons” and “devil”. Such words have arrived to us after a long trip and are still charged with all the paganism of their origins. The concept that they implied originally is not always very clear to us. And how uncertain they appear to the missionary who must translate them!

Bibles for the Loyalty Islands transcribed the terms “demons” as *demoni*. Only the natives who have been to high school and the indigenous pastors have been able to comprehend the meaning of this word. They have kept the word, though for no purpose, as I have never heard them use this word on their own initiative. However, the first indigenous preacher who evangelized Caledonia, a man of real worth, brought all his school books and all his learning to explain the message to the first Christians and to find adequate terms to make them understand. Many words employed by New Caledonian Christians today spring from this first effort, attempted by nationals themselves. The first Christians translated “demons” by *u*. The term *u* suited all actions which pertained to the demons. The *u* might possess a man, and would leave him by means of incantations. He was a sort of evil god. The dictionary assigns to the word “demon”, the sense of “god, genii, impure spirit”. The New Caledonian dictionary would list the same meanings for the term *u*. One may say that there is an identity. I do not know from where these demons sprang in ancient history, but the origins among the New Caledonians appear less distant than they are in Europe. The old men can remember in Caledonia, that the *u* was a primitive sort of ancestor spirit, considered a totem, having altars and sacrifices offered by women. As long as the ancestor cult, celebrated by the men, involved the ceremonies of the matriarch, totemic beliefs degenerated, and only manifestations of idolatry, based originally on the ancient colorful totems, remained. The young New Caledonians today are ignorant of the history and origins of the *u*, but they have a clear concept of the present power of the *u* and they avoid being possessed by it. The passages in the Gospels about the demons take on for them a reality far greater than for ourselves. When one is accustomed to pagan demons identical to the *u* of the New Caledonians, whose action is limited to the region of the totem and who are homeless, lost and in fact powerless as soon as they are taken from their latitudes, then one readily understands why the demons of Gadara entreated Jesus not to chase them far, but to let them remain in that region.

But there also the soul evolves and the language follows it. The term that is too precise, when it has not enough elasticity to enlarge its sphere of meaning, should give way to another less restricted term. “Demon” does not always mean a spirit as personal as the *u*; he is of a neuter gender in the texts and most often found in plurals. “Demons” is a kind of collective noun, and has sometimes a generic sense, so clearly so, that the humble New Caledonians instantly perceive the idea in hearing

the New Testament explained. They describe this meaning as *pa awire* "those who hold the powers" (these are generally evil).

Another word, which certainly is very French (though derived from Greek), is "the devil". When I was a student and edited the Year Book of Missions, I dared, with the audacity of youth, to challenge a missionary (without success, however) who in an article put under the rubric of "devil" all the genii, spirits, and gods of paganism. This facile form of translation has a precedent in Roman Catholicism, as well as in mediaeval times, and in current missions. Later on, I myself, in turn, came to know the difficulties in translating the word "devil". The New Caledonians designated him already by the word *Meavora*. I knew that they used to employ certain things to drive away the *Meavora*, but we were not very clear about it all. One day I questioned a New Caledonian who initiated me with considerable talent into his language; in speaking to me in the Creole French of the area, he replied to me, "Evil be to him who evil thinks. *Meavora*? Why that is the god who....." and there followed a detailed description. It appeared to me that the term *Meavora* was much more specific in the mind of the New Caledonian than would ever be the foreign term "devil".

On a big feast day we translated in New Caledonian the drama "The Sacrifice of Abraham" by Théodore de Bèze, and we had our students perform it. The part of Abraham was played with honesty and average talent. But a young New Caledonian, who represented the devil, played his part with art and most remarkable conviction. We were very surprised that at the time of the rehearsal, far from appearing in clean clothes, according to the daily custom, he put on his dirtiest clothing. I asked him the reason. "The people should understand", he said, "that the part of the devil must be well enacted, but he should always appear dirty".

Thus the concept of *Meavora* has become without trouble that of evil. For the New Caledonian he is the "spirit of evil". The name of Satan has each time been transliterated. Hence, Satan and the devil are one. If the devil appears as the power of seduction and of evil, which the pagan knows about, finds in himself, and calls *Meavora*; the name of Satan is not lessened in value. It is simply the name which Jesus used in speaking of the Temptor. Satan appears to the pagan as the name of the devil. The traditional method of missionaries is to reject pagan words because they seem to soil the purity of Christian thought, but this is not the case in our experiences in our restricted field of work. It is not very wise to insert into the first editions of the native Bible the words that the translators have introduced directly from Greek into our French Bible, while in the pagan tongue one might find equivalent terms. These are the terms one must discover in order to grasp the primitive concepts by which one can raise himself to apprehend the Christian meaning.

### The "Word"

There are other words that the learned translators of the West have in vain tried to render into rich tongues such as Latin or French. They

found obscure expressions for the common "word" or "speech", and other terms for such words as "ransom" and "peace", but these words were too narrow.

It would seem that these words would present insurmountable difficulties for the translator in primitive languages. Missionaries of the Loyalty Islands could not find the word to translate "Word", nor have they imagined that there could be a corresponding term in the native language. They simply introduced the Greek word into the vocabulary, pronouncing it in the native fashion, "In the beginning the Logos". These people are intelligent; and do not appreciate pronouncing words which make no sense whatsoever. However, when a Caledonian speaks French, he translates his thoughts as they seem to him the most adequate. He can easily express himself relative to the man who has conceived good things, has said them, or done them. He simply describes such a person as, "The word of this man is good". Thought, speech, and action are all included in the New Caledonian term *no*. In speaking of an adulterous man one may say, "He has done an evil word". One may speak of a chief who does not think, order, or act correctly as, "His word is not good". The expression "the Word of God" is limited in our speech to meaning of the divine Scriptures, but in New Caledonian it includes the thoughts and acts of God, "God said and it was done". The New Caledonian has no difficulty in seeing the Word becoming action, becoming flesh, the word becoming a physical reality. Our deceased colleague Laffay once said: "I prefer to read John in the Houailou rather than in French".

### "Peace"

For every instance in which the translation of "Word" is adequate there are a number of other words which cannot be translated without imposing on them a narrower sense than they should have, and this does not cease to be embarrassing for the translator. The tendency is to interpret Greek words with the help of concepts which belong to our Western and modern pattern of thought. To translate the word "peace" many missionaries have chosen, in the native languages, words designating "calm", or "quietness". These seemed to correspond well with the tenderness of Jesus, "I give you my peace". But peace is not calm. The great factories are also an image of peace, but not precisely of calm and quietude. The New Caledonians have often proposed the words "peace of war" as being a more complete term. In their culture it is not the vanquished who asks for peace, it is the conqueror who gives back to the vanquished the territory he has conquered from him. He has wished to subjugate man, not the land, since the land belongs to other gods than his. In instances in which the region appears to him desirable and he decides to establish himself there, he takes possession of it without driving off the original owners, for he considers that the original owners have relationships with the supernatural powers protecting such places.

Here again, the process of thought of the New Caledonian is nearer than ours to the thoughts of the ancients. We hesitate each time on the

easiest translation, to decide which could be the best understood by the people. As we explained to a New Caledonian collaborator the meaning contained in the Pauline idea of peace, he replies, "It is to give peace, for the gift of peace alone assures calm in all the areas of life". The term "peace", translated as "calm" ends up in the quietude of the mystic. On the contrary, translated as "opposition to the disorder of war", peace includes the notion of order, security, and harmony. Does not this prepare the reader to understand better the meaning of "reconciliation"?

### "Redemption" and "Propitiation"

How is the translator to express such great acts of Christianity as redemption, propitiation, and communion?

Volumes have been written to explain these words. The missionary is somewhat excused if he does not find in the primitive tongue those terms which are adequate to translate such concepts. They are perhaps the last which he must treat. One would like to await the religious experiences of the natives and let them discover the best formula.

A method frequently used suggests translating the word first according to our conceptions, while realizing that the conception of the native Christians will follow. Some missionaries have thus interpreted "redemption" by "exchange of life" and the term "ransom" by "exchange" (still a kind of payment). One theologian, to whom I showed this, was delighted with what he called, "The exactness of this translation". There could have been the idea of exchange in the ideas of Paul, but another theologian declared, "That is only the outer hull of the thinking of Paul, not its essence".

The missionary is not a theologian. His only reason for being one is to be understood by the believers. However, the idea of exchange is understood by the New Caledonians only in the sense of an equality of inter-exchange. In this category are a host of acts, social or otherwise, e.g. marriage and trade.

An indigenous collaborator, reading the Loyalty Bible asked, "If Jesus has given his life in exchange, what have men given? Their good will, their acceptance? There is nothing equal in these two sides; it is therefore not an exchange". One may tell him that Jesus has wiped out the debts of man toward God and that He did it at the price of His suffering, or one may present to him some other aspect of the expiatory sacrifice of the Saviour, all of which does not fail to move him, but it demands from his soul an enormous amount of abstraction to ask him to understand sufficiently to be able to explain it to others. Perhaps that is the reason why I have never heard the indigenous preachers of Loyalty (who were evangelizing in New Caledonia) teach with feeling and clarity the doctrine of redemption. They restate the phrases which they have learned, but they have not found the suitable terms for the thinking of the believers.

Missionaries have perhaps had to choose the word "exchange" because it seemed to them the nearest to their own conception of the redemption. But *redemption* is a Latin word a bit removed already from the term *apolutrōsis* in the New Testament. If Paul, a Jew and a disciple of the

Rabbis, could already have had a little of the juristic spirit, the Romans had still more of it. The juristic significance which the Greek word possessed to some extent was reinforced as it passed into the Latin language. This meaning has now been carried into other languages. Considering the developments of meaning which occur in such transfers, one can realize how the translation of such religious terms is precarious and dangerous.

The basic idea of "deliverance", which is originally the expression used by Paul, is not easily expressed in our word "redemption". If the "ransom" (i.e. the redemption) is a logical form of deliverance, it is not the only conceivable one. We have seen that the Loyalty Islanders translate it by equivalent exchange; and with their concrete way of viewing things they cannot conceive of an equal exchange between the physical death of the Saviour and the spiritual health of man. To translate "redemption" simply by exchange is to translate literally the term used in French, but it means placing the sacrifice of the Saviour in the framework of our civilization, basically juridical and Roman, where notions of debit, credit, prison, and deliverance from these are elementary. The native believers will repeat the lesson they have learned, but will not comprehend it.

Since the preachers who came from the Loyalty Islands wished to explain redemption to the New Caledonians, they set aside the idea of "exchange of life", which they themselves did not fully understand, and have insisted simply on the significance of pardon contained in the death of Jesus, which they have translated literally "to release".

Redemption is thus limited to the idea of deliverance. Of course, this concept in the thought of Paul does not exhaust the significance of redemption. And the missionary finds himself in a kind of impasse between the concepts of complete ransom and deliverance. As a result he must employ paraphrases, but these are long and often not very clear. One must await the native's development and determine what he understands by his experience and expression employed to describe it.

So it was that one day during a conversation on 1 Corinthians 1 : 30, our old interpreter used an expression that surprised us. She spoke of the act and process of redemption as a sacrifice and a small tree planted on land that had been cursed either by the blood of men in battle or by some great misfortune. Jesus was thus the one who was the sacrifice and was himself planted like a tree, as though to absorb all the misfortune of men and to take away from the world all its sin. The conception was deep. But was I sure that I had understood it fully? We did translate this passage of 1 Corinthians and printed it in our little native-language journal. Oh the happiness of the students when they read it! They said to each other, "Now we understand!" Before employing this expression in further translating, I took it up once more with a Caledonian evangelist. And as he had not yet formulated his thought as between the incomplete idea of deliverance and that poorly understood concept of ransom, he interrupted me and declared, "It is *nawi* that one must use". (*Nawi* was the very term I had learned from the old lady.) "Why?" I said. "Oh, because there is the sacrifice, and the life of the plant is the prolongation of the

action of the sacrifice. Jesus gave Himself by this sacrifice, and His life, like that of the plant, prolongs the effect of the sacrifice”.

Time will tell if this term, which is at the same time precise and full of meaning, is exact. One must not think of the plant in this metaphorical explanation as purely a physical object. In primitive thought it has associated with it all sorts of related concepts of existence, and even the principal of life, because the plant is sometimes a totem. Jesus is often compared to some herb. I remember that when my young son was once leaving the Islands, the people came to see him, offering him presents, and in speaking to him compared the missionary to one of the health-giving plants. In this expression *nawi* employed by our people concerning Jesus, there is at the same time the idea of sacrifice and deliverance. The word is a living reality and its sense can be enriched in proportion as the hearts of the Christians live and grow in grace. Here truly is the word “redemption”, whose translation may startle the missionary who wishes to employ some familiar, concrete expression.

There is a still more disturbing concept in the Epistle to the Romans, namely, “propitiation”. The missionary who seeks to translate this word, remembers primarily the Jewish and pagan idea of sacrifice and the purifying significance of blood in the ancient religions.

The lid of the ark of the covenant on which was sprinkled the purifying blood corresponds to the mound made of earth or of fresh herbs, reeds, or boards, which the pagans of New Caledonia prepared as a place to deposit their offerings, which are always propitiatory.

While I was seeking for the meaning of the term “propitiatory”, I heard a native Christian explain the text of Romans 3 : 25 with these words, which I translate literally, “God has made Jesus a sacrifice and the healing and propitiatory leaf for those who have faith is His blood”. This confusing and awkward expression is translated in New Caledonian by a very short word *demo*. Its original significance is “cicatrizing leaf” or “living leaf”, the ideas of healing and of life being connected. Without the sacrifice or offering, the leaf has no effect. This power, understood originally as belonging to a leaf, would be extended in the future to other objects, as the word designating it has a generic sense and is applied to all the objects asking for or soliciting divine providence. In this very primitive idea the medicinal value of the leaf is not regarded as inherent, for the leaf is effective only by virtue of its propitiatory value. When the people applied this word to Jesus Christ, they perceived that the death of Christ modified the relations between men and God and took away their sin, even as the leaves in the sacrifices formerly modified their status and took away their woe. In ancient times it was to appease the gods that the New Caledonians made their propitiatory sacrifices.

While the missionary searches painfully to explain the great facts of Christianity and to make the natives understand the love of Christ, often the non-Christians are the ones who suggest the very terms which bring the real meanings to them.

At Do Neva I was accustomed to preach on the same subject at all the Sunday services. The day would open with Sunday School. Then in the morning service I took my text from the lesson of the day. In the

afternoon they summarized that which they had retained of the sermon. And sometimes they would use some word or phrase which I did not know, but which would express exactly what I would have wished to say. In the later services I could continue the teaching of the day with an enriched and clearer vocabulary. There is no greater encouragement for the missionary than to learn from his new believers and to receive something from them.

### **The Living Vocabulary**

The translation of the New Testament, so difficult at first, becomes less arduous. A miracle happens, and the translator does not seek words further; they are given to him by the native Christians. This does not mean that the terms which have been suggested are always satisfactory or adequate, but they formulate in accordance with native thought patterns those concepts which one wishes to express. Even though they are concrete, they may have generic value. At least, they are the living thoughts of the heart, and they express the realities of life, inspired by experience.

It is said that in the languages of Europe the gospel is abstract and metaphysical. But in New Caledonian it is understood, proved by experience, and thought out by the people. Christian truths can find adequate expression in the language of those regarded as having only crude, materialistic intelligence. The missionary has once more experienced the power of the gospel, and the people have helped him in better understanding this power. He perceives that even though the psychological and theological terms are abstract and indefinite in European languages, the equivalent expressions as they come from the experience of the believer are concrete and definite. He realizes that religious facts expressed in abstract terms are so often without active value and constitute merely a dead formula, whose real significance has disappeared. He has seen the danger of himself betraying the gospel, if he does not employ the living and meaningful vocabulary. Otherwise he becomes an unskillful translator, dogmatic and artificial, failing to understand the spiritual development of the believers. He realizes that the first translation is only a rough draft, and sensing that it is imperfect, he asks God to raise up among the more instructed of the young believers those who may follow the example of Paul, the great missionary, and who like him may understand the force of the concrete and vital language of life.

And in the course of their ministry they will see that presentation of the gospel message which brings hope to the most primitive of peoples; and when the people attempt to express the results of their experiences in their native language, Christianity may appear to the missionary as though it has been robbed of the historical garments which are so familiar to those of Western civilization. But in the native language, the gospel appears in all its beauty, light, and power, with a message of life for those who seek it with simplicity.