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## Meaning and Translation

*Eugene A. Nida*

"What do the Scriptures mean by 'kingdom of heaven'?" "When Matthew writes 'kingdom of heaven' does he mean the same as Luke, who consistently employs 'kingdom of God'?" "Is one to conclude that the two phrases refer to two different periods or events in the program of God (as some insist), or are they simply two different phrases for one and the same thing?" "How is it possible that some versions can translate substantially the same Greek expression in different ways, for example, the RSV renderings of 'He who through faith is righteous shall live' in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, but in Hebrews 10:38, 'but my righteous one shall live by faith'?" "In translating shall we say that 'Melchizedek had no father or mother', following a literal rendering of Hebrews 7:3, and hence give the impression that Melchizedek was a miraculous being, as some contend, or is one justified in adding something about 'no record of father or mother'?"

These and many more questions arise constantly during the process of translating the Scriptures, and the answers to these problems are not simple. In fact, they involve some of the most fundamental concepts of meaning, symbolism, culture, and communication. Moreover, the translator's task is even more complex than that of the exegete, for he must be concerned not only with the meaning of the Greek or Hebrew; he must find means by which the meaning of the original text may be adequately transmitted in another language and a different culture.

For the Bible translator there are two insistent questions which lie behind each and every problem: (1) What does the original text mean? and (2) Is my rendering of this substantially the same as the original? Anyone who is engaged in translating knows that absolute identity of meaning is impossible. What is said in the source language (the one from which one is translating) can never be rendered in the receptor language (the one into which one is translating) in such a way as to correspond in all details of connotation and denotation. Try as one will, such a theoretically desirable goal is not attainable in human

speech. Accordingly, what the translator strives for is the closest natural equivalent. However, he cannot accomplish this unless he understands some of the limitations of language (and hence of translating) and how to overcome these restrictions to the greatest possible extent.

### **The Meaning of the Original**

The first fundamental question, namely, "What does the original text mean?" is by no means as simple a question as it would at first appear to be. The average person will answer, "Just what it says!" But such a reply is no answer. If one is asked what is the meaning of a particular verse, one is almost inevitably led to reply, "That all depends on what is meant by 'mean'." No adequate answer can be given unless we understand something of the entire process of communication.

If we wish to define the act of communication from the standpoint of the initiator (and this is where the communication process begins), we may say that it is the process of encoding a message so that the receptor may react in accordance with the intention of the communicator. This type of definition may seem unnecessarily involved and technical, but all the parts are essential if one is to understand the meaning. However, in order to comprehend the implications of such a definition, we need to examine it piece by piece.

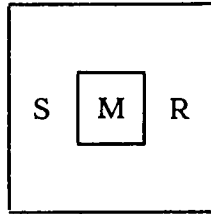
### **Encoding**

The term "encoding" means that in dealing with language we are fundamentally dealing with a code. It is a system of arbitrary symbols—sounds which "stand for things." There is, for example, no logical or rational reason why English-speaking people should say *girl*, Spanish say *muchacha*, German *mädchen*, and Navajos 'at'ééd. The combinations of sounds which we use in our language symbols are completely arbitrary. Furthermore, the way in which we employ such symbols is also arbitrary in the sense that certain classes of words must precede other classes and that some words can be used for subjects, others for predicates, others for attributes, etc. The essentially arbitrary way in which symbols are combined is fully confirmed by the fact that no two languages have identical grammatical schemes. However, once we adopt an arbitrary set of language symbols and are willing to abide by the rules for using them, we may use this code to communicate about anything. Whatever is logical about the code is derived from the patterns of internal consistency. It is in this sense that each language creates its own kind of "logic".

### **Language and Cultural Context**

Though, on the one hand, we insist that a language is essentially a kind of arbitrary code, nevertheless it does not exist as an isolated system. It is intimately connected with another essentially arbitrary system, namely, the patterns of behavior which we speak of as the culture of a people. Accordingly, we say that every language is in a very real sense both a reflection and a model of the culture of which

it is a part.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, if we are to understand a message in the language, we must comprehend the way in which the essential units function as symbols for parts of the culture. We may illustrate some of the relationships by means of the following diagram:



The small square in the center, marked *M*, stands for the *message* which is communicated, or for the totality of messages (an infinite number) which may be communicated by the language. The larger square symbolizes the total culture, of which the message, as a manifestation of the language, is a part. The correspondence in shape between the two squares is intended to emphasize the intimate relationship between language and culture—especially on the level of the meanings of words.

The *S* in the above diagram symbolizes the *source*, i.e. the communicator's meaning of the message *M*. The *S* is dependent first upon the entire background of the culture (the message can only be communicated in this form by making use of a code employed by the society in question), and secondly, upon the personal experience of the communicator. This is the only means by which he can learn to use and interpret the code.

This dependence of meaning upon the experience of the communicator (whether speaker, writer, or anyone who communicates through verbal symbols, or derivations of these, for example, the Morse code) means that if two different persons make exactly the same statement (including substantially identical information and voice quality, etc.) they still will not "mean" exactly the same thing, for no two persons can have identically the same experience. Of course, for all practical purposes we tend to overlook or cancel out such differences, or we automatically make adjustments by sizing up the background or condition of the communicator. For example, as Americans, we would be more lenient in our judgments of a person with a British accent using the word "bloke"; and similarly, Britishers who know American usage know that in our use of "homely" we mean 'ugly' and 'unbecoming', not 'simple' or 'guileless'.

In our diagram we have used *R* to indicate the *receptor's* meaning. This meaning is also dependent upon the total cultural context and the experience of the receptor, which means, of course, that each hearer

<sup>1</sup> There are certain important limitations on the relationships of language and culture which must be recognized. For example, it is quite unjustified to equate a masculine-feminine gender system in a language with a high sex consciousness of the people speaking the language, or to argue that the grammatical complications of a language are an index to the mental abilities or thought processes of the people who speak the language in question.

understands the message in a slightly different way. Theoretically, this means that though we might be able to plot the communicator's meaning as a point, the meanings received by various receptors would be a cluster of points concentrated more or less close to the communicator's meaning, but never completely identical with it. Such a theoretical statement of the problem may seem utterly unrealistic and impractical, because we know that people do communicate with a high degree of satisfactory responses. Nevertheless, the theoretical statement of the essential difficulties is necessary if we are to understand certain complex problems of exegesis.

### Intention

Another essential feature of our opening definition, namely, intention, has been implied in the above discussion of communication, but it needs further emphasis and clarification. We have stated that communication is a process of encoding a message so *that the receptor may react in accordance with the intention of the communicator*. There is no real communication unless someone is listening. A man talking to himself is not communicating—he is just externalizing his thought processes.

If, then, we assume that communication involves intent (to deny such an assumption is to make communication only an idle game of babbling), we cannot overlook the factor of intent in the communicator. This intent, however, exhibits itself in a very complex way. If, for example, a speaker desires to elicit some response in his hearers (whether ideational or practical), he must reckon with the background of the hearers. He will choose words which he presumes will bring forth the proper responses because they reflect features of the backgrounds of the hearers. In a sense, the speaker has to put himself in the hearers' shoes and try to determine something of the hearers' cultural background, for only by this means can he be reasonably sure that the hearers will "get the point" of what is being said. Every good writer must constantly bear in mind his audience if he wants his articles to be read; every speaker must adapt himself to his audience or he will lose them.

All of this means that we cannot presume to know the meaning which a speaker intends to convey by a particular message if we know only the speaker's background; we must also attempt to determine what adaptations he has made for the sake of his audience.

Nevertheless, despite all of these complications, the picture of communication is still somewhat more intricate. The communicator is not only concerned with the receptors' background, but with what the receptors may presume to be a part of the communicator's background. In other words, the interpretation of background works both ways. A speaker, for example, tries to understand the background of the audience, but at the same time he knows that his audience is in turn trying to understand his background. Accordingly, the speaker tries to make necessary adjustments to avoid possible misunderstanding. All the while, the audience is making similar adjustments, for they must not only reckon with the extent to which the speaker reflects

his own background, but the degree to which the speaker is making adjustments to the presumed background of the audience and to what he (the speaker) understands to be the audience's knowledge of the speaker's background, and the possible sensitivity of the audience to the speaker's presumed adjustment to the audience's background. These mental calculations on the part of the speaker and the audience are like a series of rapidly moving tennis balls, beginning from opposite directions and bouncing back and forth between closely juxtaposed walls.

In a very real sense communication, even though it may involve only one message transmitted from one speaker to one hearer, is nevertheless a two-way affair. The factor of intent and interpretation of intent guarantees that communication must be a type of reciprocal enterprise.

## Response

Throughout our discussion of intent we have presumed a response, for intention is meaningless without response. However, response is far more complex than we may have imagined. In many traditional descriptions of psychological stimuli and response involving language we often deal with nothing more complex than such stories as that of Jack and Jane and a bright red apple. But response to the average communication is far more complex than Jane's wanting an apple, because of the stimulus of having seen it (together with associated stimuli of hunger, remembered pleasure in eating, etc.), her asking Jack to get it for her, and Jack's climbing the tree in response to Jane's verbal request. Language serves many more subtle uses than this. It may produce psychological states of hate, love, or joy. It may recall moments of pleasure or times of horror. It may calm anxious hearts or inflame violent passions. It may create a world of make-believe or explain the grim realities of an atomic age. It is a means by which men plot their rebellions against God and an instrument by which God reveals Himself to men.

We frankly do not know precisely how language does work to produce so many and varied responses. But if we can ascertain the response of the receptor to a message, we are able to know more about the communicator's meaning, unless, of course, the response was a miscalculated reaction to the message. In other words, by judging the response (i.e., the end result of communication) we can determine a good deal about the intention and hence about the communicator's meaning.

One of the important implications of this entire discussion is the fact that in trying to determine the communicator's meaning we are entirely dependent on inferences from secondary sources. We cannot open any person's head and examine the thought processes. We can only know what is thought from the symbols used. The symbols can be understood only in terms of the code of which they are a part. The code can be known only by understanding the total culture of which it is a vital functioning unit. The intention, though we assume

—and rightly so—its presence, can be known only by the symbols and the response, in the context of the total culture and the particular event or series of events in which the message functions.

The preceding sections may, no doubt, have seemed unnecessarily technical and unrealistic, for we generally do not think of cultural backgrounds, intentions, responses, and linguistic systems when we try to arrive at the meaning of a Biblical passage. We brush aside the theory and set out to cut the Gordian knot by one blow of our theological sword. However, our solutions are sometimes not convincing, even though the results may on occasion be justifiable.

### “The Kingdom of Heaven” and “The Kingdom of God”

Some of these difficulties we may illustrate with a consideration of the phrases “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven”, mentioned at the beginning of this article. Most scholars regard these phrases as equivalent, but there is a sector of Christendom for which these phrases do not mean the same thing, despite their occurrence in parallel passages. By examining these phrases in the light of what constitutes communication, we may be able to arrive at somewhat deeper insights than those involved in purely “theological” defenses of one or another position.

The writer of the Gospel of Matthew (the various theories as to authorship need not concern us here) was most certainly of Jewish background. His use of words, method of argumentation, manner of presentation, and basic themes are clear evidence of the Jewish cultural tradition. This Semitic flavor has always been recognized and in fact has led some scholars, including some early church fathers, to believe that the Gospel of Matthew was first written in Hebrew (or Aramaic) and then translated into Greek.

Knowing this much about the writer from the internal evidence of the Gospel (quite apart from any argument derived from statements of authorship coming from the early church fathers), we can conclude that in his use of the term “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew in almost all instances uses “kingdom of heaven” while Luke consistently employs “kingdom of God”), he is most likely to reflect a background of the Jewish culture. What, then, was the usage in this culture?

We know that considerably before the Christian era Jews had stopped using the term “Jehovah” (perhaps pronounced something like *Yahwe*) and wherever this four-letter name for God occurred in the Hebrew Scriptures, anyone reading the passage generally substituted *Adonai* ‘Lord’, though in some passages *Elohim* ‘God’ was uttered. According to tradition, the name of *Yahwe* was uttered once a year by the chief priest in the Holy of Holies, but except for this very special usage, it was a kind of “taboo” term. However, once this so-called proper name for God became taboo, there was a tendency to include *Elohim* within the same orbit of verbal avoidance. Quite understandably, those bilingual Jews who spoke Aramaic and Greek and who were quite numerous in Galilee as well as in the Diaspora, apparently carried over into Greek the same tendency to avoid the

use of *Theos*, the Greek equivalent of Hebrew *Elohim*. This would be particularly true in certain well-known phrases where the context would not require the use of *Theos* in order for people to understand. This, then, is regarded by most scholars as what happened in the case of such phrases as "kingdom of heaven," and "right hand of power," and "majesty on high." "Heaven," "power," and "majesty" were used as functional substitutes for the word "God".

Having ascertained something of the background of the writer and the cultural context of the phrase in question, we must then inquire concerning the background of the hearers. From all we can judge from internal evidence (data which are also corroborated by the testimony of ancient writers) this book was written primarily for people of Jewish background. The constant references to Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Christ, the exegetical treatment of Old Testament passages, and the themes which are highlighted throughout the book all point to a predominantly Jewish audience. This evidence coincides with the obvious intent of the writer, namely, to convince those of Jewish background that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

On the basis of these several lines of evidence, it becomes quite understandable why Matthew should have made almost exclusive use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven." On the other hand, it is true that in some few instances he employs "kingdom of God," e.g., Matt. 12:48, 19:24, and 21:31 and 43 (the *Textus Receptus* reading in 6:33 is not attested by the best manuscripts). In Matthew 12:28 there is very good reason for the use of "God" in the phrase, since there is a contrast between Satan and God. In Matthew 19:24 the phrase "kingdom of God" appears to be used as a type of synonym of "kingdom of heaven" in the immediately preceding verse. (In fact, the ease of transition, or substitution, of one phrase for the other in these two verses seems to indicate quite clearly their equivalence, as far as Matthew was concerned.) In Matthew 21:31 and 43 the context would seem to allow of either usage. This means, of course, that the early church employed both phrases, but Matthew seems to have had in mind the special audience to whom he wished to communicate effectively, and to do this he employed a phrase which would conform primarily to their language experience, satisfy their feeling for linguistic propriety, and convey a message in a context appropriate to the Old Testament prophetic setting.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew's interpretation of his audience's background and their interpretation of his background and intentions provide seemingly

<sup>2</sup> Some people have raised the question as to precisely what expression Jesus used in his teaching. All the evidence would point to the fact that when addressing a Jewish audience in Aramaic he no doubt used the equivalent of "kingdom of heaven" for the same reason which we have pointed out in the case of the writer of the Gospel of Matthew. However, it is certainly not only possible but highly probable that Jesus used the equivalent of "kingdom of God" in speaking to Greek-speaking persons. That Jesus spoke Greek is highly probable in view of his having grown up in Galilee, which was far more cosmopolitan and "progressive" than Judea. Certainly, any communications which Jesus would have had with Pilate would have had to be in Greek—unless, as seems very unlikely, there was an interpreter, or as even more unlikely, Pilate had learned some Aramaic.

adequate evidence of the fact that "kingdom of heaven" would be culturally, logically, and religiously the more meaningful expression.

On the other hand, in the Gospel of Luke we meet with a writer who is Greek in his background and is addressing a two-volume work, the Gospels and the Acts, to a Greek audience.<sup>3</sup> Luke's aim seems to have been to convince some government officials or other prominent persons as to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the basic religious character, and hence legitimacy, of the Christian movement. Accordingly, in view of the background of the writer and the audience, the intent of the writer, and the reciprocal interpretation of the background and intent by the audience, Luke's use of "kingdom of God" (with which the Marcan usage is in complete agreement) seems to be nothing more than a complete equivalent to Matthew's phrase "kingdom of heaven."

The answer to this exegetical problem cannot be found merely by arguing about theological implications or by citing parallel passages, though for most people these types of evidence may seem to be conclusive. In order to get to the heart of the problem, we need not only to decide whether or not the two phrases are equivalent, but to understand how the cultural backgrounds in question could give rise to these different usages. An adequate exegesis, accordingly, must involve the total cultural background of both the communicators and the receptors, plus the consideration of the intent, as revealed in the total message. In other words, even a very limited problem of exegesis involves the entire process of communication.

### **"The Just Shall Live by Faith"**

A considerably more complex problem exists in Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38. In traditional translations all these passages are rendered substantially alike: "the just shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4) or "the just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17, Gal. 3:11, and Heb. 10:38). In the RSV one encounters three different renderings: "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4), "he who through faith is righteous shall live" (Rom. 1:17 and Gal. 3:11), and "but my righteous one shall live by faith" (Heb. 10:38).

Some persons have contended that the RSV renderings reflect the perversity of the committee; others have insisted that these differences are a subtle attempt to undermine the authority and integrity of the Scriptures. Still others, however, see in such distinctions valid differences based upon reliable exegetical techniques and reflecting fundamental differences in meaning. An examination of these diverse translations in the light of the principles of communication reveals some very significant facts.

The passage in Habakkuk must be understood in the light of its cultural and theological setting. Even the casual reader recognizes that in its Old Testament context this passage refers to the faithfulness which will sustain the righteous man. Westcott (in commenting

<sup>3</sup> The Gospel and the Acts, especially the first part, are not without Semitisms, but these seem to be designed primarily to add local color and flavor to the account, that is, to reflect the Semitic setting of the scene.



on this Habakkuk passage in his *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 337) states, "The original text gives the sense: 'His soul is puffed up with pride: it is not right within him; but the righteous shall live by his faithfulness', where the reference is to the vain confidence of the Chaldean invader as contrasted with the trust of the people upon God."

This interpretation is fully in accord with the Hebrew text, the context of the passage, and the theological orientation of the prophet Habakkuk, as well as that of the period during which Habakkuk was an important voice. Any attempt to read back into the prophecies of Habakkuk the doctrine of justification by faith as elaborated by Paul in Romans and Galatians and in substantiation for which Paul cites this Old Testament passage is not defensible, either in terms of the principles of divine revelation or consistency of cultural perspective. Everything we know of the background of Habakkuk, the cultural context in which his prophecies had meaning, and the understanding of his hearers all point to the necessity of interpreting this passage in its traditional form.

On the other hand, once we have determined the significance of a passage for one writer, we must not assume that the same words must have precisely the same meaning for another writer, even for one who quotes the passage in question. That is to say, we are not obliged to insist that Paul employed this passage in the same way that Habakkuk meant it. At first glance this principle of multiple meanings may appear to be a dangerous one, and yet a quick glance at any number of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament will indicate quite clearly that the same words and phrases are often used with dissimilar meanings. In Matthew 3:15 the words "Out of Egypt have I called my son" can only be construed as referring specifically to Jesus. Otherwise they would have no significance in the Matthaean context. In Hosea 11:1, however, these same words can only refer to the children of Israel. To insist that this phrase in the two contexts must have precisely the same meaning would reduce the whole message of the Scriptures to an absurdity. The only possible solution to such problems is to take seriously the principles of communication and reckon seriously with the total context in terms of the cultural backgrounds of the speakers, hearers, and the specific intent of the particular message.

If we return now to Paul's use of the Habakkuk passage in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, we are again faced with the need of analyzing the background of the communicator, the receptors, and the specific import of this expression within the larger context of the letters to the Romans and the Galatians. There is practically no dissent from the opinion that the principal theme of these two books is justification by faith. Paul declares in Romans 1:16 that the gospel which he has preached is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes—to the Jew first and also to the Greek (a theme which he elaborates later in the same epistle). He then declares in verse 17 that the righteousness of God is revealed from faith unto faith (this latter phrase *from faith unto faith* is probably best interpreted simply as emphasizing that all this is dependent upon "faith from start to finish"). In the

light of this significant theological setting of the importance of faith as a basis of salvation and from what we know of Paul's development of the argument throughout the rest of the epistle, it would seem entirely out of place for Paul to insert a statement about "living by faith." What Paul no doubt wants his reader to understand is that having been justified by faith (having received salvation on the basis of believing) the believer has life.

The context of this quotation as it occurs in Galatians 3:11 is even more decisive. Paul has just pointed out that "no man is justified by the law". He then quite understandably declares that "the man who through faith is justified shall live". To make this even more clearly evident Paul continues to declare that "the law is not of faith".

But not only does the immediate context of the Epistle to the Galatians support this interpretation, but all that we know of the difficulties encountered by Paul in dealing with the legalistic Judaizers in Galatia substantiates Paul's obvious intent of emphasizing the necessity of justification by faith—not by the law.

Accordingly, if we view Paul's usage of the Habakkuk passage (which in the Septuagint—the form quoted in Romans and Galatians—can have either meaning) in the light of the fundamental principles of communication, we cannot escape the conclusion that Paul employed the Habakkuk phrase in a special manner consistent with the cultural background of himself and his audience (including the canons of Biblical interpretation regarded as valid in his day), the particular import of the immediate context, and the requirements of communicative *intention*.

Having determined that in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11 one must reckon with a different meaning than in Habakkuk 2:4, we must not, however, be led to think that the Pauline usage in Romans and Galatians determines the meaning of the same phrase in Hebrews 10:38. The RSV and the ASV (1901) both employ the reading "but my righteous one shall live by faith", where "my" is well attested by a convincing array of ancient authorities. Our interpretation of this expression in Hebrews must again be based upon the principles of communication. Those who insist upon the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews are admittedly faced with a somewhat greater problem, for if the Habakkuk passage seems to be used in Hebrews with a quite different meaning, it would seem strange that one and the same writer would employ the same phrase with different meanings in different epistles. However, Pauline authorship of this epistle has been questioned from earliest times and generally rejected, even by some of the most conservative scholars. Accordingly, in terms of general background we certainly seem to be dealing with a writer who, though familiar with Paul's teaching, approaches the significance of Jesus Christ from a somewhat different standpoint and in his emphasis upon faith comes closer to Habakkuk's viewpoint. The famous eleventh chapter of Hebrews, which follows almost immediately after the quotation from Habakkuk, presents faith as the sustaining confidence in God, despite the persecutions, trials, and uncertainties of life. All

that we know of the immediate context and the larger theme of the epistle as a whole leads us to the conclusion that the rendering in the ASV and RSV (as well as in most modern translations) is wholly justifiable.

In these passages, even as in the case of the use of the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven", the fundamental answer to the problem of interpretation, and hence of translation, is to be found in the total cultural backgrounds of communicators and receptors, including especially a realistic view of what was regarded in New Testament times as legitimate quotation and adaptation of Old Testament passages. In other words, in order to know what was meant, we must attempt to reconstruct the communicative process at each point and to determine in so far as possible what went on. Only in this way can we be reasonably certain of the meaning.

### **"Melchizedek . . . without father or mother"**

The problem of how to render Hebrews 7:3 is not particularly serious, for there is more or less general agreement by scholars as to the meaning of this passage. However, the problems in this verse serve to illustrate further the significance of cultural background in speaking of the communicator and receptors.

As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews develops the theme of Melchizedek, he is obviously concerned with the problem of priestly succession. From all that we can judge from the document and corroborative data from Apostolic times, some persons questioned the priestly function of Jesus Christ on the basis that he was not in the direct line of descent, either through Aaron or Levi (an interesting prelude to the problem of Apostolic succession). The Epistle to the Hebrews points out that neither was Melchizedek in the line of Aaron or Levi, and yet Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, for whom there was no record of father, mother, genealogy, time of birth, or date of death. As far as the communicator and the receptors of the Epistle to the Hebrews were concerned, the problem of Melchizedek was evidently not a question as to whether he was some miraculous theophany—supernatural being come down direct from heaven—but whether or not there were genealogical lists which might substantiate his legitimacy in the priestly tradition. If one reads more into this passage than this, he would certainly seem to be going far beyond anything which is justified by any reconstruction of the communicative process through a study of the cultural background and the specific intent of the particular message.

### **Summary**

In emphasizing the necessity of exegetical interpretations based upon the total cultural backgrounds of the participants in the communication (the speaker or writer, and the hearer or reader) and upon the particular intent of the message in question, we have only highlighted principles which have been used by devout, scholarly exegetes throughout the centuries. These principles are, however, in conflict with certain not uncommon interpretive practices (e.g., that different

words must imply distinctly different objects, that the same word always has one and only one meaning in all contexts, and that the first occurrence of a word in the Bible governs its meaning throughout the rest of the Scriptures), the results of which force an artificial conformity and consistency upon the Scriptures. Fundamentally, such an attitude toward the Bible implies a complete failure to recognize the significance of the Scriptures as a series of messages addressed to people with different cultural backgrounds, facing diverse problems, and having varying needs. On the other hand, to treat the Scriptures in the light of their proper cultural context is to realize that the Bible is the Word of Life, for it comes out of the context of life and speaks about life to living men and women.

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## How Would You Do It?

Sometimes we have to resort to Rundi customs to get an idea across. Nahum 3:6 "I will cast abominable filth upon thee"—people here have no idea of pelting people with foul things (cf. rotten eggs, in England), but the greatest insult to anyone is to throw grass at him! He would mind being spat upon less! So we felt this was the right meaning here. We had an amusing time over Micah 6:9 "Hear ye the rod". It so happens that all five senses except seeing are expressed by the same word, context deciding whether hearing, feeling, smelling or tasting is intended. So naturally, with *rod*, the word would mean *feel*! Fortunately they have the expression 'Give ear to' which we were able to use here. It reminded me of Hebrews 6:5, "Tasted the good word of God", where the obvious meaning was 'heard'. There we had to use a word meaning to put food into the mouth.

*Rosemary Guillebaud.*

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## It May Not Be So Difficult

There are many passages in the Scriptures which seem at first sight to present insuperable difficulties to the translator, when, in reality, they may turn out to be amazingly easy. For example, in Mano, a language of Liberia, the expression in 1 Timothy 5:6 "...is dead even while he lives" presented no trouble at all, despite the fact that in many languages it seems to make no sense at all. In Mano, however, there is an idiomatic way of talking about just such a person, literally, "He is a dead body." Now this does not mean that the person is really dead, but that though he is alive he is as good as dead. What could be better for such a passage?