

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

Revision of the Français Courant Bible

The following contribution relates to the work of the translation team responsible for the Français Courant Bible. It is in the form of a paper discussing some of the objectives for the revision project now being undertaken. The writer is Dr Jean-Claude Margot.

During a recent meeting of the revision committee of the Français Courant Bible, one of the members, Jean-Marc Babut, identified four types of correction that should be brought into this version:

- **textual problems** (taking account of the findings of recent research regarding the state of the text, whether New Testament or Old Testament)
- **exegetical problems** (numerous comments have been made by readers regarding the interpretation of this or that text)
- **stylistic problems** (for example, in certain situations, the concern to make explicit what is implicit in the original text has led to the translation becoming too heavy)
- **problems of consistency** (making the translation of stereotyped expressions consistent, like *koh 'amar YHWH* “Thus says the LORD”)

At the same meeting, Dr Jan de Waard commented that in the work of any revision committee, it is a good idea first to review 3 or 4 chapters taken from different books, in order to identify precisely the types of corrections that must be considered for the whole of the Bible. It is advisable, in fact, not to undertake revision work without a plan, because that would risk proceeding in a tentative way and losing a lot of time in more or less unnecessary discussion.

It will not be possible for me within the scope of this paper to deal with the whole of this question of revision. So I propose to give some typical examples of the objectives to be aimed for in the revision project for the Français Courant Bible. You won't find it hard to understand that there is much more to say on the subject than what I am going to present here. However, I hope that what I do present will be enough to convince everyone that there is no area that should be left out when the revision of a version of the Bible is put in hand, no matter in what language. Apart from this, I am sure that it is not necessary to mention anything about obvious printing errors (spelling mistakes and misprints), since the correction of these will go ahead in any case.

Problems related to the text and its layout

(a) **Textual analysis:** As far as the New Testament is concerned, it will be necessary to take into account the modifications brought into the fourth edition of the UBS Greek New Testament (still to be published). As for the Old Testament, here is what was agreed at the meeting referred to above: the translators are to take care to consult, in a systematic way, the solutions that have been proposed in the 5 volumes of the Interim Report of the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project (published by the United Bible Societies), and in the 2 volumes that have appeared of the definitive Report prepared by Father Barthélemy. (At the time when the translators were working on the Old Testament, the major part of these works was not available to them.)

(b) **Division of the text:** In many cases a careful discourse analysis can call into question the division into paragraphs which has been adopted until now. For example, in the Français Courant New Testament, the translator followed without hesitation the division of the text in The Greek New Testament (UBS), which is sometimes questionable. It is therefore necessary to attend to this in the revision, and also, for other reasons as well, to review and carry out modifications in the section headings.

(c) **Poetic lines:** In the Old Testament one of the translators has frequently produced very short lines in poetic passages. He believed that this would make it easy for reading; but this is far from always being the case. In fact, some sentences are broken in an unhelpful way (the subject separated from the verb, or the verb apart from its complement), which leads to difficulties of comprehension, and can cause a reader to have to read a part of the text twice to discover the logical connection between successive lines. This fact has to be set against the assumption that a short phrase or clause is necessarily easier to understand than a long one. I will give just one example of this, which is taken from S of S 5.5 (the girl is speaking):

With one leap I got up
to open to my beloved.
My hands and fingers
are covered with oil of myrrh,
when I take hold of . . .

and there you could make all sorts of guesses as to what object the young lover was about to take hold of. In fact, the words "when I take hold of" are found right at the end of the second column of the page, and it is necessary to turn over to find the answer:

the handle of the door.

It would have been better to put the whole clause on a single line, "when I take hold of the handle of the door", without hurting the poetic

quality of the text. And an unnecessary problem would have been avoided.

(d) Punctuation: One of the translators (René Péter-Contesse) has made a report on the inconsistency of punctuation in the Français Courant Bible, and on the layout of direct discourse in particular. The principle adopted consisted of commencing a new paragraph with a dash (—) for each new speaker in conversation, but putting only inverted commas (‘’) to introduce a quotation of the words of someone. However, in practice there are many inconsistencies. Concerning this, here is a relevant passage from the report in question: “The original text of the Français Courant New Testament was redrafted by the translator with a view to the layout of conversation with the use of dashes (like that which was followed later in the 1982 Bible); but at the last minute the decision was taken, on the grounds of space, to drop the idea of using dashes, and go back to inverted commas without starting a new line. The necessary changes were then carried out on the typed copy, not by the translator but by a third person who, pressed for time, was not able to do the work with the necessary attention to detail. Hence the variation in layout, not only between the gospels, but often within the same gospel, in the 1971 New Testament. During the preparation of the text for the edition of the Bible of 1982, the work had to be done in the reverse direction (putting in dashes again, and removing inverted commas), which did not improve the situation. I do not want to describe here all the variations in layout that are actually found in the 1982 Bible.”

Furthermore, the same report adds: As for the punctuation which follows Jesus’ frequent declaration *amen amen lego humin/soi* “truly I tell you”, we find in the Français Courant Bible (when it is not the quotation of some statement) the three following variations:

Truly I tell you: small letter

Truly I tell you: Capital letter

Truly I tell you, small letter

This example shows clearly that the checking of whatever system of punctuation is adopted must be carried out with great care.

Problems related to the principle of functional equivalence

Over the years, and with the benefit of experience, we have discovered a number of cases where the translator has either on the one hand been bound by a literal approach or by the renderings of traditional versions, or on the other hand tended to clarify an expression unnecessarily out of a concern for functional equivalence.

As an example of the first fault, I quote a text chosen at random, Rom 1.23: “they worshipped **images** representing mortal man”. This has to do, not with “images” in the usual sense of the term in modern

French, but with idols. The translator has obviously remained a prisoner of the terminology found in other French versions. In fact, in the Français Courant Old Testament, we took care to speak of idols in such cases, or of statues if the context indicated that it was a reference to statues dedicated to religious use. It will be necessary to correct Rom 1.23 and other passages in this sense.

For the second fault I will give a double illustration. Firstly, in Am 1.3, we actually have “the decision **which I have made**”, which could have been rendered very well by a more concise form like “my decision”. That would not in any way complicate the understanding of the passage in modern French.

In the other case, Ru 1.1, we read these words: “they went to live for a while in **the fertile region** of the country of Moab.” If we consider the wider context of the verse, the explanation “the fertile region” is unnecessary. In fact it is stated at the beginning that there was a famine in the country of Judah, and so, for that reason, Elimelech and his family migrated to the country of Moab. Any reader today understands readily that if they left Judah it was to go to a country which was not touched by the famine. The translator of the passage recognised this, and in the revision of the book of Ruth she put simply “into the country of Moab”. It requires constant attention to find the right balance in applying the principles of functional equivalence.

Problems related to equivalence in weights and measures

Objections have been addressed to us on the subject of the modern values given for weights and measures in the Français Courant Bible. Here is what one of the translators, Jean-Marc Babut, had to say about them: “The system adopted introduced a number of anachronisms, which upset some readers. Some examples:

Ex 25–40: the covenant box was 125 cm long (for ‘two and a half cubits’)

Ezek 40–48: the rod for measuring the new temple was 3 metres long (for ‘6 cubits’)

Mt 5.41: if someone makes you carry a load for 1 kilometre (for ‘1 mile’)

Mt 5.26: ‘to the very last cent’ ”

We should comment here that the members of the revision committee are far from being of the opinion that it is necessary to abandon the system which was adopted earlier. However there are some passages where the present equivalent should be reviewed. So, and I quote from the report: “In a number of cases, changing the unit of measurement caused a figure to be lost whose value was perhaps more symbolic than numeric . . . for example, the measurement of the size of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21.16), 2200 km (for ‘12,000 stadia’). This equivalent diverts the understanding of the reader towards the statement

of a fact which is difficult to imagine, and wipes out the symbolism of the figure 12,000 (= 12 x 1000).” This comment is legitimate, even taking into account that there is a note at this passage explaining the symbolism of the original figure. For the rest, the author of the report suggests solutions, in a way that seems to be wise, for most of the cases that he has quoted: in Mt 5.41, “a thousand paces” (instead of 1 kilometre); in Lk 24.13, “a two hour walk” (instead of 11 km); and so on.

Problems related to the adoption of inclusive language

In the special issue of the journal *Meta* devoted to Bible translation (issue 32/1, March 1987, Montreal) there is a balanced article by Paul Ellingworth on the controversial question of inclusive translation of the Bible (*Translating the Bible Inclusively*). Since I can only touch on the subject in this section, I would refer readers to that article for a fuller discussion of the various aspects of the topic. For my part, I would say that an effort has already been made by the translators of the Français Courant Bible, especially in the Old Testament, not to translate as “men” those expressions in the original text which clearly refer to all people, men and women. (A similar effort has been made in the revision of the Good News Bible in English.) It is true that in French *hommes* “men” can be used in two ways: in the general sense of human beings, and in the specific sense of males. However, it is also true that, in many passages, the reader tends to understand the term exclusively in the second sense, if we do not guard against that.

I recently had occasion to review the Letter to the Romans with the translator of the New Testament in Basic French (Lydie Rivière of Abidjan). She seemed particularly sensitive to this type of problem, and I was led (without too much difficulty!) to see her way of thinking. So, for example, I am going to correct the heading of the section in the Français Courant Rom 1.18-32, which at present is worded “All men are guilty”. It is not that I am afraid of feminist demonstrations demanding for women their equal share of the guilt! But it must be admitted that this passage in Romans has a universal application, encompassing the whole human race and not just the male half of it. The heading will have to become “All human beings are guilty”. In verse 18, likewise, “and all evil committed by men” will be replaced by “and all evil committed by human beings”. In other places it is also possible to use expressions like “everybody”, “people”, and “persons”. The essential thing is to find the type of solution in each place, which the meaning of the original text dictates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I come back to what I wrote at the beginning. I don't pretend to have given a comprehensive statement, far from it. However I hope that the sample material presented above is sufficiently challenging to prove to those who are interested that, when we engage in the revision

of a version of the Bible, we must be ready to give attention and consideration to all aspects of translation: textual, stylistic, semantic, cultural, and so on. This, it will be obvious, is a large undertaking, which requires a well-organised team, ready to work methodically, and not just to follow the inclination of the moment.

Wine or Spirit? Rotuman understanding of a controversial text

The following discussion has been produced in this form from notes supplied by the Rev. Jotama Vamarasi, translator of the Rotuman Bible and Translations Officer of the Bible Society in the South Pacific.

Ma 'au la se 'oan 'e uaini, tēet ne hö' ag raḡraḡhi; 'au la hoi ke 'e 'At Ha'a (Eph 5.18).

Literally: And you (3 or more) to not (get) drunk with wine, (a) thing that causes violent character; be full (filled) instead with (the) Holy Spirit.

This text has been widely used as a proof text for the “Spirit-filled life” by the so-called Holy Spirit movement. It has therefore been the focus of much interest and controversy among Rotuman readers as to its true meaning.

As with all translation, it is important to understand not just the meaning intended by the translator, but also what the readers and hearers take the words to mean. We will try to illustrate this in the comments that follow.

Ma . . . la se. Beginning a sentence with *ma* gives this conjunction a much stronger force than usual, like saying, “But . . . must . . .” Likewise the use of *la* with the negative *se* is also a strong expression, “Beware to not . . .”

'au. This plural, referring to three or more people is well understood in Rotuman: “you and you and you and . . .” Any address, or warning, or instruction to the community is always to *'au*. This includes all listeners, men, women, young, and old.

'oan, “drunk”, literally means to be poisoned. The same word is used of fish poisoning, or any other food poisoning or overdose. With wine, the kind it obviously seems to refer to is the new wine which is still bubbling. Fruit wine at this early stage of fermentation is bubbling and foamy, and very poisonous.

Community drinking is always by a group (of men). If one person is drinking alone, he is selfish; if only two are drinking together, they are secretive. Some of the purposes of such community drinking are:

- relaxation after a hard day's work
- sharing, reflecting, evaluating the day's work
- leaving time for the womenfolk to cook dinner
- guarding against individuals getting drunk.

“To not get drunk (poisoned) with wine” implies certain things. It can mean that moderate drinking is all right; it can mean that drinking is all right unless it causes a person to stagger or vomit. It can also mean that wine is prohibited, but other intoxicating drinks such as kava are allowed.

Uaini is a transliteration of the English word “wine”. So does this verse speak only of Eastern wine or Western wine, wine made from grapes? The island brew is made from fruit such as oranges, pineapples, bananas, mangoes. The best is reckoned to be what is made from the juice of a green coconut, and this is always white, not red.

In fact *tēet* means “a thing”, and it never refers to a liquid like wine. And it is really the excessive drinking rather than the nature of the drink that leads to violence. But in normal community drinking no one drinks to get drunk—it is only an after-work pre-dinner fellowship.

Hō' means to “pile up”. The picture is of a person gradually getting more and more drunk, which eventually leads to violent behaviour.

Ag rāhraqhi. This expression is made up of two terms, *aga* or “character”, and *rāhraqhi* (from the root *rāhi*, “fire”), “rekindled fire”. It is thus intended to mean fiery or violent character. But it can also be understood in a number of other ways:

- (1) “recklessness”—and this does not mean the unlawful use of force
- (2) “bravery” or acting the daredevil
- (3) “prodigality” or a life of gaiety
- (4) masculine, “macho” behaviour, without any suggestion of immodesty. (Parents enjoy watching their sons grow up with some wildness in their behaviour.)
- (5) “reconciling”, as the rekindled fire cleans up all inflammable rubbish
- (6) “consistent” or “enduring”

This indicates that *ag rāhraqhi* is really an expected and accepted pattern of behaviour; and in its Rotuman setting a person doesn't get drunk to be *ag rāhraqhi*. In community life, the worst form of behaviour to display or possess is “being inconsiderate”.

hoi ke. The adverb *ke*, “instead”, again presents the idea of a strong contrast: “Never, never get drunk with wine, but always . . .” *Hoi*

means to be filled with, or to be full of. It is used mainly for filling something with liquid, although it can also mean to be "satisfied" with solid food.

From the contrast between the two parts of the verse, it is understood that the person who is filled with the Holy Spirit will not possess or manifest violent character. Therefore the argument and controversy, and sometimes violent action, that have appeared with some people who claim to be "filled with the Spirit", are seen to be a denial of that experience.

'At Ha'a is quite clear in its meaning, "the Holy Spirit". Unlike wine, the Holy Spirit cannot be seen; but still the idea of being filled with the Holy Spirit is clear. In Rotuman ancestral worship a person talked about being "possessed" by the spirit of, say, his father. This was a totally "outside of me" power or infilling.

These comments indicate some of the reactions to the text of Scripture, by readers who have no access to other Bible versions or to "helps" such as commentaries. Perhaps a new translation, taking better account of the response and understanding of the audience, could be :

"And you to be not drunk with any alcoholic drinks that may cause inconsiderate character; be filled instead with the power of the Holy Spirit."

The word "power" would be the same as that used in Acts 1.8; and the contrast reflected in this verse from Ephesians would then be similar to what is described in Acts 2. The apostles were not "drunk" as some people thought, but were "filled" with the Holy Spirit that was poured out on that day, and demonstrated the "power" of that "filling".

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