

Section 3 (verses 39b-49)**39b-40 Analogy and interpretation****39b Analogy**

Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?

40 Interpretation

A disciple is not above his teacher ...

41-42 Aside – rebuke of teacher to disciple (2nd person singular):

Why do you see ... ? How can you say ... ? Hypocrite, first take ...

43-45a Analogy and interpretation**43-44 Analogy**

No good tree bears bad fruit ... figs are not gathered from thorns ...

45a Interpretation

The good man produces good ... the evil man produces evil ...

45b Summary

For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks

46-49 Challenge to obedience**46 Question**

Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?

47-49 Double comparison

Every one who hears my words and does them is like ...

he who hears and does not do them is like ...

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS**Translating the New Testament into the Avar language**

The following article has been written by Magomed-Kamil Gimbatov and Yakov Testelets, who are members of the translation team which produced the translation of the New Testament in Avar. The article tells something of their work, and will be of wide interest to translators around the world.

The original version of this article was published in Russian in 1994 in the journal Alpha & Omega, and we are grateful for permission to reproduce it here. The title of the original publication was “Iz opyta perevoda Novogo Zaveta na avarskij jazyk” and it appeared in volume 1, number 2, of Alfa i Omega, pages 117-130.

– Editor

In the course of the long history of relations between Christianity and Islam the Bible has been translated many times, both into Arabic and into other languages of the Muslim East. The development of 20th century communications and the opening up of cultures previously "closed" to one another has significantly deepened and speeded up the process of mutual understanding.

There are many problems involved in translating the New Testament into the languages of peoples outside the Christian world which can be summed up as the search for terms to translate concepts and ideas which are foreign to a particular culture.

The Avar language is spoken in Dagestan, a mountain area in the Northeastern Caucasus (Russian Federation) where people typically know and use a number of languages. Avar belongs to the East Caucasian family of languages, and is in wider use than any of the many other languages of Dagestan, being spoken by more than half a million people. It has a long and rich literary tradition, beginning in the 15th century. Long before the Russian Revolution, it possessed a brilliant and extensive body of literature – especially Muslim theology and poetry. In the 20th century opportunities for users of the language have increased, with the production of books, newspapers, and journals, and radio and television broadcasts.

The Avar language, like other languages of Russia, has undergone a complex process of development and extension of its range, while at the same time suffering the influence of Russian officialese and the propaganda cliché. A number of important works of Avar literature have been translated into Russian, among them such writers as Makhmud of Kakhab-Roso (1873-1919), Gamzat Tsadasa (1877-1951) and Rasul Gamzatov (born 1923). Many classics of Russian and world literature have also been translated into Avar.

Since the early 1990s the Stockholm-based Institute for Bible Translation (IBT) has co-operated with the G. Tsadasa Institute for Language, Literature and the Arts, part of the Dagestan Academic Centre, in order to translate the New Testament into the principal languages of Dagestan. The translators are, in the main, scholars employed by the Tsadasa Institute. The translation team also includes an exegetical editor to ensure that the translation remains faithful to the Greek original, and a linguistic editor proficient in the language of the translation, who checks the translated text for linguistic naturalness. As well as many dictionaries and commentaries, the team have at their disposal completed translations of the Scriptures into various languages (Russian, European, a few Caucasian), and also specialist aids to the translation of individual books of the Bible produced by Bible agencies. The Avar translation team, which includes the two of us who have written this article, is led by Russian Academician G.G. Gamzatov, the Director of the Tsadasa Institute. Our permanent advisor is the Director of the Translation Department of IBT, Dr Simon Crisp, a Caucasian scholar specialising in the Avar language.

We should point out that the Institute for Bible Translation is not a missionary organisation. In Dagestan in particular, where Islam is the dominant religion, Bible translation is looked on as a cultural activity, a means of promoting mutual understanding between Christian and Muslim peoples.

The task facing the translation teams is that of producing a **high quality** translation of the Scriptures in accordance with modern standards of translation, without over-simplification, compromise, or omission. As translators we depend on the interpretation of the New Testament texts passed down through the tradition of the Christian church. We are fully aware of our responsibilities in this task and of the complexities involved in bringing it to completion, and try to keep a sober estimate of our inadequacies.

Work on the Avar translation of the New Testament has been going on now for a number of years, and our first publication – the Gospel of Mark – was released in 1995. Even in this short period, we have tried in the course of the work to solve some fundamental problems. Some of these are the subject of the remainder of this article.

Translating theological and cultural terms

One of the most pressing problems in Bible translation is finding suitable equivalents in the language of translation for theological, cultural, and historical terms. Where an Islamic equivalent exists which expresses a similar idea, this problem is relatively simple. The common heritage of Christianity and Islam in Abraham and his descendants shows in the large number of characters well known in both religions, both in the Sacred History and in the common areas of theological understanding and vocabulary.

Thanks to Islam, the Avar language has acquired from Arabic roots such words as *Allah* for “God” (related to the Hebrew *’elohim*), *malaik* “angel”, *ruh* “soul” or “spirit”, *Iblis* (from the Greek *diabolos*) “Satan”, *zhen* (from the Arabic *jinn*) *djinn* “demon”, *avarag* “prophet”, *va’za* “teaching, preaching”, *iman* “faith”, *Masih* “Messiah, Christ”, *murid* “disciple”, *munah* “sin”, *alzhan* “heaven”, *zhuzhah* “hell”, *q’iyamaseb q’o* “judgement day”, *ilahiyab* “holy”, *du’a* “prayer”, *shamat* “sabbath”, and many others. The meaning of most of these terms in Islam is either identical or very similar to the corresponding Biblical ones. When the words are used in translation, however, an apparently minor difference may on occasion take on greater significance.

Closer examination of certain terms may reveal that equivalent meanings can be deceptive. For example, the translation of the words “preach” and “preaching”, and “pray” and “prayer” may present a problem. Near equivalents for these words are readily available, but at the same time these have a somewhat different sense to those of Christianity. Terms derived from Arabic with the meaning of “preaching” and “prayer” refer in Islam to certain clearly defined and formalised activities, well understood by the speakers, but very often different

from the intended meaning of the New Testament. Thus we apply extreme caution when using them in translating equivalent New Testament concepts.

Another example of false association is the Arabic-derived word *q'urban*, meaning "sacrifice". Despite the fact that the Gospels contain an exact equivalent: "If a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban (that is, a gift devoted to God)' " (Mark 7.11), this word cannot be used here because of a definite difference in meaning. In translation we used another word derived from Arabic, *nazru* "something dedicated to God".

The most difficult term to translate in all Dagestani languages is "baptism", the Greek *baptisma*, literally "washing". Although Islam has well-defined words for ritual washing, it is not possible to use them to translate "baptism" for the following reason: both the idea and the practice of Muslim washing has very little in common with Christian baptism. When we looked for a way of translating this word, we had to separate out various elements of meaning in it: turning to God, repentance from sins (in Islam *tawbu*), washing or immersion in water, and divine forgiveness of sins. As a result we translated the word "to baptise" and "baptism" by means of a set phrase (see below).

The translation of Mark 10.38 demanded a particularly difficult decision. In Greek the verse says *dunasthe piein to poterion ho ego pino, e to baptisma ho ego baptizomai baptisthenai* – "Can you drink the cup I drink, or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?" We are faced with two metaphors, for which literal translation is impossible, since the expressions "drink the cup" and "be immersed in water, be washed" are, for the Avar, in no way connected with the idea of suffering and death. Nevertheless there is an equivalent for the first metaphor; in the Avar language there is an idiomatic expression "to drink from the horn of death", which is identical to the idea of the Gospel's "cup". For the second metaphor the translator used a less obvious equivalent: "to cross the river" (*or baxine*) – an expression which can express "to experience hardship, suffering" and at the same time contains the idea of immersion in water.

Translating important concepts which have no equivalents in Islam

Many of the most important concepts of Christianity which are absent in Islam have to be represented by loan-words or by literal translation – in some cases by selecting a word of equivalent meaning, and often after extended consideration of several possible variants. One of the most difficult terms is "glory". The difficulty lies in the fact that the concept of a mysterious power originating in the spiritual realm and giving victory over enemies is evidently entirely foreign to the peoples of the Caucasus, even though it is widespread amongst the ancient Indo-European and Semitic peoples. Depending on the context, "glory" can be translated as "praise", "might", or "greatness"; however none of these three by themselves render the full value of the Greek *doxa*. In this

case we can only hope that a deeper understanding will “shine through” for the spiritually acute reader according to the context.

Another example of the same kind is the idea of the anointed King and the Kingdom of God. One difficulty here lies in the fact that in the entire history of Dagestan there has never been a kingdom of the kind that existed in the ancient Eastern world. In addition, translations have somehow to be found for the titles of Herod and his sons, the Roman emperor and his deputies in Palestine. Little by little we came to the following conclusion. The words “King” (with reference to Jesus Christ, “King of the Jews”) and “Kingdom” (of God) were translated using an Avar loan-word from the Persian, *parchah*, Russian equivalent *padishakh*. For the Roman emperor (“Caesar”), we used an archaic Avar word which is still understood, *q’aysar*, from the Arabic-Persian *qaysar*, the title of the Byzantine emperor. The function of the Roman Procurator, or governor, was translated by the word *sardar*, the name given by the locals to the Tsarist governor in Tiflis at the time of the Caucasian War. Herod and his sons (tetrarchs) were called *khans*, since in great measure their powers, and also their distinctive semi-independence from the authority of the emperor, were very similar to the position of the Avar rulers (*khans*) during various periods of Dagestan history.

The expression “Son of Man” literally translated into Avar simply means “somebody’s son”. Of course, in the actual context of the phrase’s use in the Gospels this would be nonsense. There does happen to be a phrase in the Avar language, coming from Islam, ‘*adamil timer* “son of Adam”, which means a human being in general, someone belonging to the human race, expressed by reference to the first man, Adam. This expression is used in the translation.

The word “law”, used in the Gospels, is translated by a word derived from the Greek (via Arabic) *q’anun*, which comprises both the concept of justice and that of a code of rules for human society. So that the reader can understand that the context is that of Jewish religious laws, in some cases it is appropriate to add a reference to Moses (*Musal q’anun*, “the Law of Moses”).

It was not easy to find an equivalent for the expression “Good News”. In the Avar language there is an Islamic word, *Injil* (in Arabic, in the early Islamic period, it was pronounced *’ingil*, from the Greek *evangelion*), which is used for the sacred writings of Christianity. For the Muslim, including the Avar, this word means the divine revelation (in the form of a sacred text) given by God to humanity through the prophet Isa (Jesus), in the same way that the Taurat (Torah) was given through Musa (Moses). Of course this was not the apostolic understanding of the content of the Christian message. Thus we had to use the combination *Rokhalil Khabar*, which literally means “message of joy”, that is, happy, good news.

The word “Church”

The word “Church” presents particular difficulties, as we might expect when we think that even many Christians do not understand it

correctly. When people today say "church", they often mean a particular building, or an organisation consisting chiefly of clergy (priests and monks). It is even harder to find a word or combination of words which adequately translates the meaning for people unfamiliar with Christianity. Surprisingly, the Greek word *ekklesia*, indicating in the classical language "an assembly of the people", "a gathering of citizens", has come into Avar and other Dagestani languages in the form *kilisa*. This, like the word *qanch* "cross", is an ancient borrowing, presumably from the time before the arrival of Islam, when Dagestan came under the influence of neighbouring Christian states. In modern usage, however, this word indicates a place of Christian worship. Thus it is completely inappropriate as a translation of its New Testament ancestor *ekklesia*.

We were obliged to look at various words which are closer to the meaning of the Greek. Some of these words are *dandel'i* "meeting", *danderussin* "assembly", the Arabic-derived *mazhlis* "meeting, conference", *zhama'at* "society, community", *ahlu* "race, people, family, group of people united by a common goal or interest", as in the Arabic phrase *ahlu-l-kitab* "people of the Book" or "people of the Scriptures", which describes both Jews and Christians, and *ummat* "people, tribe". In Islamic theology the phrase "Mohammed's *ummat*" means the universal community of Muslims, the Muslim world, in the same way as the Christian world is known as Isa's *ummat*. None of these descriptions on their own, without explanation, can be used to translate the word "Church" in the New Testament. Thus, after long consideration, we adopted the phrase *imanl'urazul ahlu*, meaning "the community of believers", "the believing people". This translation corresponds closely to New Testament teaching about the Church.

It is interesting that the same word *ahlu* with the meaning "tribe, community" has been used by translators for different reasons in the introduction to the Gospel of Luke in order to translate the expression in the original Greek *pepleroforemenon en hemin pragmaton*, which the Russian Synodal translation renders "about the events well-known amongst us" (Luke 1.1). The expression "amongst us" cannot be translated literally into Avar, but has to be rendered "among our people"; and here the same term was used as for the word "church", literally "among our tribe, community (*ahlu*)".

The translation of proper names, and equally of Aramaic and Hebrew quotations in the Greek text of the Gospels is relatively simple: the translation of forms is always easier than that of ideas. Hebrew personal and geographical names which are known to the Avars through Muslim sources, are translated in the phonetic form found in the Koran and Arabic literature. From these we took the names of Moses (*Musa*), Aaron (*Harun*), Noah (*Nuh*), Elijah (*Ilyas*), Isaiah (*Ishaya*), Lot (*Lut'*), Abraham (*Ibrahim*), Jacob (*Yaq'ub*), Benjamin (*Bunyamin*), and, from the New Testament, Jesus (*Isa*), Mary (*Maryam*), Zachariah (*Zakariya*), John (*Yahya*). Geographical names included Syria (*Sham*) and Egypt (*Misri*).

Where such forms do not exist, as a rule we tried to retain the

sounds of the Hebrew or Aramaic, though not of the Greek. We did this because in the first place Semitic forms are significantly more familiar to Avar readers through the influence of Arabic, and in the second place the Avar language, unlike ancient Greek, has the sounds to express Hebrew and Aramaic words. By way of illustration, consider some of the Aramaic phrases found in Mark's Gospel. The words of Jesus Christ addressed to the dead girl, "Talitha kumi!" (Mark 5.41), and the cry of welcome, "Hosanna" (Mark 11.9-10), can both be conveyed in the Avar language in practically the same phonetic form as the Aramaic. Avar contains those very Aramaic consonants which are absent from Greek. In the same way the names in the genealogies of Jesus Christ in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke can be transliterated into Avar almost unchanged from their Hebrew originals.

Peculiarities of the Avar language

Any translator working with two languages belonging to different families and language types will constantly come across problems arising from differences between the languages. Sometimes these present almost insurmountable difficulties in translation.

In the translation process we quickly discovered, for example, that the Greek genitive case has, in comparison with the Avar (and indeed the Russian) a broader meaning; frequently translating the Greek genitive into an Avar genitive results in words that are meaningless. For example, "the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1.1) has to be translated as "the Good News about Jesus Christ begins". Another classic example of this kind of problem is the expression "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1.4); in Greek this is *kerisson baptisma metanoias eis afesin hamartion*, where two genitives and a prepositional phrase give the translator the complicated task of unravelling these theological concepts. In this case a literal translation retaining the structure of the original would be meaningless in Avar. A word-for-word translation of our rendering comes out something like this: "proclaiming to people a return to God, when they had repented he immersed them in water, and God forgave their sins."

Quite often the situation has a more positive aspect, however. The "exotic" language often has the potential to express certain things in Bible translation in a way that is more profound and interesting than that of the languages of people who are, or have been, mainly Christian.

In some cases the Avar language provides a more precise equivalent for the Greek than, for example, Russian or English. Thus for example, the Greek verb *kerusso* "expound, proclaim" in expressions such as "preach the Kingdom of God" has an exact Avar equivalent in the form of the verb *l'azabize* "to expound, proclaim". This verb, much better than the traditional Russian *propovedovat* "to preach", expresses the heart of the matter: it is not a question of preaching "new teachings" or "a new religion", but of a proclamation of events that have happened.

Like Greek, though not like Russian, the Avar language uses complex

structures with “strings” of a number of subordinate clauses, not only in the literary language but as a natural feature of the organisation of text, both written and spoken. Thus, for example, in Avar it is quite natural for three verses (Mark 5.25-27) telling of the healing of the woman with an issue of blood to be translated as a single sentence.

The special expressive qualities of the Avar language are found in the so-called evidential verbal forms. Such forms are used when the speaker himself has not witnessed a given action or event, but has come to know about it indirectly or by report. So, for example, when in the episode of the rich young man it is said that “he had great wealth” (Mark 10.22), this information, which was acquired by the teller from hearsay rather than from actual experience, can be expressed by means of these evidential verb forms. In addition, evidential verbs are used in the text of parables, being the standard form for reported speech in texts describing what the teller has not actually witnessed.

There is also a rich system of demonstrative pronouns and pronominal adverbs, including in addition to degrees of distance (“this” and “that”), terms which express position as higher or lower (“that above the speaker” and “that below the speaker”). This means of expressing spatial relationships is used, for example, in the translation of the parable about the rich man and Lazarus: “those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us” (Luke 16.26).

In Avar, as indeed in many other languages, the first person plural pronoun, “we”, has two forms: the inclusive *nil'* means “you and I”, and the exclusive *nizh* “we but not you”. Since there is no such distinction in Greek, the translator must, in each case where the pronoun “we” is used, make a choice between the two forms; sometimes this choice is obvious, but in other contexts it is not. The most interesting example of this kind is the words of Peter on the occasion of the Transfiguration: “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Matt 17.4). Who did Peter have in mind? Was it the apostles alone, or all those present, including Christ himself? Following traditional exegesis of the Transfiguration we chose the inclusive pronoun – “it is good” for the disciples precisely because the transfigured Christ himself is there with them.

The Avar language has at its disposal rich grammatical resources for expression of focus. Thus with the help of a particular construction we can translate the focused part in the clause “that is why I have come” (Mark 1.38).

Avar verbs often make use of the causative (“act so that ...”). This category is useful to the translator in various difficult passages. For example, the words of John the Baptist “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3.8) cannot be translated literally, but the difficulty can be avoided with the help of a causative construction, literally, “Act so that the tree of your repentance bears fruit.”

We also find it essential to employ the many interjections which are in frequent use in Avar. In this connection we might mention the interjection *Vore!* “Watch out!” “Take care!” (the warning against false

prophets, Mark 13.23); *Ha-ha!* "Aha! Now I know what to do!" (parable of the rich fool, Luke 12.18; parable of the dishonest steward, Luke 16.4); *Hakha!* "Come now! Tell us!" (exclamation of the unrepentant thief, Luke 23.29). As can be seen from these examples, interjection in the Avar language can convey the same meaning as full words in other languages.

Making use of aspects of Avar culture

In addition to the advantages in understanding that use of the Avar language gives, certain aspects of Avar culture give the reader of the Avar translation an advantage over the reader of translations into Russian and other European languages. This is because many elements of ancient Middle Eastern culture have been preserved in the Caucasus with little or no change. There are a great number of examples of domestic and everyday details, now beyond the experience of members of industrialised societies, especially city-dwellers, which are a present reality to inhabitants of the mountain regions of the Caucasus.

The Avar reader will find nothing extraordinary in carrying a sick man on a "blanket" (Mark 2.3-4), since this is the traditional way of carrying the sick and wounded. Demolishing a roof in order to reach the interior of a house is an entirely familiar action, used, for example, in assaults on strongholds and fortified buildings in wartime; there is even a special phrase for this in Avar (*t'ox bichize*). Nobody would be surprised, either, that the steward should "hurl" the debtor into prison by order of the judge (Greek *balei*, Luke 12.58): the traditional form of prison in the Caucasus is literally a "pit" *gvend*. To the European reader it is not clear how a lamp can be put under a measure (Mark 4.21), since such a reader has only a vague idea what this "measure" (*modios*) must look like. Not surprisingly, the Russian Synodal version translates it as "vessel". For the Avar, again, there is no problem here: everybody knows the word *sah*, which means exactly the same as the Greek *modios*. Expressions such as "go up to Jerusalem" or "go down to Egypt" which are Semitisms in the Gospels, (compare the modern Hebrew term for immigration to Israel, *aliya* "raising, coming up"), have to be changed in Russian (as in English and German) to the more usual "go" or "depart". In the Avar translation the vertical sense can easily be retained, as is natural to mountain-dwellers. Marriage customs, in many ways similar to those of the Middle East, allow a precise understanding of the phrase "the friend of the bridegroom", and likewise the parable based on the custom of welcoming the bridegroom (Matt 25.1-13).

Avar readers also discover in the Gospels a reference to one of the characters of their own folklore, the "demon king" (*zhunduzul khan*), in other words the "prince of devils" in the Synodal Version (Luke 11.14). The Holy Spirit appearing "in the form of a dove" (Mark 1.9) is also an image known from folklore. Denarii and drachmae, coins of the Roman empire, are remembered to this day in the Muslim East and are even currency in some Islamic countries (the *dinar* and the *dirhem*). The custom of wailing for the dead has also survived; there is no need

to explain to an Avar, as there is to a Russian, that Mark 5.38 refers not only to the spontaneous emotional reaction of the relatives of the dead girl, but to traditional practice. When an Avar reads in Luke 19.41 that Jesus “wept for Jerusalem”, he understands that this is not a description of a purely emotional experience. It is a classic example of *ma’u*, mourning, a conventional form for the expression of grief, as the wording and imagery used by Christ confirms.

The peculiarities of mountain terrain and the poverty of the soil available for cultivation make the story of the seed planted in stony ground particularly vivid (Mark 4.5); there is even a special word *t’alu*, which describes the kind of rocky land that is almost impossible to farm. The Avar reader will also understand clearly what is meant by “pouring the grain into your lap” (Luke 6.38). An extensive vocabulary of shepherding terms is helpful in understanding the detailed parables and metaphors of the Gospel of John. Many Gospel sayings fall naturally into the forms of Avar proverbs (for instance, Luke 9.62).

In his letters the Apostle Paul often uses metaphors connected with sporting competition; these also readily find equivalents in Avar. For example, the image used in Philippians 3.14, *kata skopon dioko* “I press on towards the goal”, can be translated with the aid of the expression *ch’alde shshveze* “to race for the finish”, taken from the language of horse racing.

Thus, difficulties which arise because of differences of language and culture, which at first glance appear insurmountable, can be resolved without glossing over the problems outlined above. More than this, the Avar language in some contexts turns out to be a better means of expression than some of those languages which have a long history of Bible translation. Undoubtedly this demonstrates the unique nature of the New Testament text – a text created in the medium of a particular language and culture but at the same time open to every language and every culture.

NOTES

“Black but beautiful” (Song of Songs 1.5)

In a recent issue of *The Bible Translator* (April 1996) Dr KN Ettien has provided a very insightful article on the conjunction “but” and some of the translational issues surrounding its use. True, as he concludes, translation of this conjunction cannot be taken for granted. I do, however, have one point of disagreement with the article. On page 224 under the subheading “Racial prejudice in translating ‘but?’” Dr Ettien suggests possible racial overtones in the translation of the conjunction.

The case in point is the well-known clause from Songs 1.5, “I am black but beautiful” (RSV and most other English versions). Although Ettien disagrees with Feld’s claim that such a translation is racially motivated, he does suggest that rendering the Hebrew *waw* as “but” rather than “and”