

## FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

### Curses and blessings in Genesis in the light of the extension of personality

*In the article which follows, Solomon O. Abegunde of Nigeria writes about a problem which has concerned him in working with translators in his country. The insights which he brings to the problem will be helpful to translators in many other parts of the world, I feel sure.*

— Editor

In checking the book of Genesis with a group of translators recently, I suspected that the rendering of passages containing vows, curses, and blessings did not show any appreciation of the importance or weight of such utterances. It was only in the case of prayers that the passages appeared to be treated with the degree of seriousness that I believed was required (and this applied even where the word “pray” did not really refer to prayer).

When I investigated further with the translators, I discovered that they had very wrong ideas about the seriousness of the expressions for vows, curses, and blessings. In all cases the words they had used were really “church” words. “Blessing is what the pastor says over church offerings,” one said, “and a vow is what you say you’ll do, or won’t do, especially when you are angry.” “People curse one another every day; what is so serious about it?” interrupted another. To him a curse was just the same as a rebuke or as name-calling.

A day before the end of the checking session I gave a lecture on “Curses and blessings as related to West African beliefs about the extension of personality.” After the lecture one of the translators said, “Now I understand. **No wonder Esau was so angry!!**”

The belief in what Aubrey Johnson called **the extension of personality** (in his book *The One and the Many in Israelite Concept of God*) in the Old Testament in general, and in Genesis in particular, and what it means in regard to vows, curses, and blessings, is almost identical with the thinking of many West African tribes. Where it is involved in any text, it is important for the translator to be aware of it, since it may make a lot of difference in the choice of words, and even in the stylistic approach to the entire text.

#### **The extension of personality— what it is**

Yorubas, like the people in many of their neighbouring tribes in West Africa, think of the extension of personality as an undefinable but real and vital force “which enables each individual to exercise some subtle influence for good or ill within the community” (Johnson). This personality is known as *orí* among the Yoruba, that is, “head”, or sometimes *orínú*, “the inner head”. It is regarded as the human counterpart, the invisible essential person, and the essence of being.

The effect of this force is believed to be as real as its human

counterpart. In its positive and good aspects it is manifested as blessings, while its negative or bad expression is felt as a series of misfortunes resulting from a curse. A Yoruba wife who is dogged by misfortunes, for example, is advised to make an offering to her "spirit-husband", that is, the husband's counterpart. The nearest equivalent to this force in Western thought is perhaps the "guardian spirit".

Just as there are good and bad people, *orí* may be good or bad also. If a person possesses good *orí*, everything that he sets out to do succeeds even when all odds are against him. On the other hand, if a person has bad *orí*, he is constantly plagued with misfortune. *Orí* is not to be confused with luck or chance; it is believed to be real and persistent. It can act independently for or against its human counterpart. It continues to live and work even after he is dead. It may work through the medium of material things like personal possessions, or it may put vitality into things otherwise immaterial and normally without force, for example human words, prayers, curses, or blessings.

### How it operates

Various accounts in the Old Testament illustrate the many extensions of human personality. A typical example that is common to both the ancient Hebrew and the Yoruba is the belief in the power of words. The Hebrew term *dabar* and its Yoruba equivalent both mean more than just a word. They are as powerful as the thing intended. When a *dabar* has been uttered with the whole *nepshesh*, "soul" or "person", its power is immensely great. It takes on a life of its own beyond the control of the speaker and achieves its effect by a kind of innate power. This explains the dilemma of Isaac after he had blessed Jacob by mistake. Much as he would have liked to take back his words and change their effects in favor of Esau, he could not cancel the blessing (Gen 27.33-37).

Another extension of human personality which is also regarded as having power is the name of a person. For many people around the world a name is more than a mere label only incidentally associated with the one who bears it. Among the ancient Hebrews, as well as among Yorubas, various rites were used to determine what names a child was to bear. Since the Yoruba people believe that a child's name is supposed to have a real force in determining his character, names are not given haphazardly but according to the circumstances prevailing at the time when children are born. As children grow up names are supposed to have certain inherent powers, which exercise some constraint upon them, and give form and solid content to their will and character. Hence when a child behaves in a way that reflects his name, the Yorubas will quote the proverb, "The name that is given to a child becomes a part of the child." Similarly when Jacob stole his brother's blessing, he (Esau) said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times" (Gen 27.36). And Abigail also said of her husband as she made an excuse for him, "As his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name and folly (Hebrew *nabalah*) is with him" (1 Sam 25.25).

To give a name to a person or an object is to declare ownership or

superiority over that person or object. To know a person's name is to have some sort of control or power over that person; consequently to tell someone your name is to surrender where that power resides. The ancient Hebrews, and the Babylonians also, believed that this power of a name applied even to the gods. It is only when a god is known by name that he can be worshipped and called upon, and when necessary controlled by magic. This explains Moses' concern that when he got back to Egypt the children of Israel might want to know the name of Yahweh.

The Yorubas believe even more about the power of a name over the bearer. Not only the gods are controlled by calling on their names; even diseases respond to magic once the magicians invoke their names. This is based on the idea that when a name is invoked, the bearer of the name appears or works whether desired or not. This may account for the reluctance to give or state one's name and the corresponding desire to know it.

Besides the word and the name of a person, his personal properties may also serve as an extension of his personality. If a Yoruba king or paramount chief is unable to attend an urgent meeting, his staff of office, his sword, or his ceremonial horse tail is sent to represent him, and is accorded the honor that befits the king or chief. A native doctor may send his cap, ring, or an armband to cure a patient if he finds it impossible to attend the patient personally. So when Elisha sent his staff as the instrument for restoring the Shunamite woman's son (2 Kg 4.29), he was sending his forceful personality. When the cloak of Elijah was picked up by Elisha, it was the extension of the very person of Elijah, "a double share of his spirit", that Elisha inherited (2 Kg 2.9-15). This also explains why, when Achan was to be destroyed for selfishly violating the taboo which had been put on the spoil taken at the capture of Jericho, everything that he had was punished along with him. Everything through which his personality could be extended was exterminated: "his sons and daughters, his oxen and asses and sheep, and his tent, and all that he had" (Jos 7.24).

A slave, a servant, or a messenger was also regarded as part of a master's property and could serve as an extension of the master's personality, in both ancient Hebrew and Yoruba thought. Almost 100 years ago when the British were in the process of acquiring Yoruba land, a number of Yoruba chiefs and war-lords were represented by messengers if they were unable to be present at a treaty-signing meeting; and any treaty thus signed was as binding as if the chiefs had signed it personally. When Bethuel received Abraham's servants and the gifts sent by Abraham, it was Abraham that he received. And when Rebekah was handed over to the servant by Bethuel, it was like putting her into the hand of Abraham himself (Gen 24.28-60).

The exercise of the extension of personality is not limited to human beings alone in Hebrew and Yoruba thought. It applies also to God; and in the case of the Yorubas, the divinities and spirits are also capable of extending their personalities. To both societies God is a very personal God: he participates in human affairs as if he were himself a human

being. His attributive names among the Yorubas and his designations in time of trouble by various biblical characters are eloquent testimonies to his personal interventions in the affairs of men. To the Yoruba God is "The Silent Judge", "One who stands by his words", "One who watches over his people without slumbering", and "The One with the extraordinarily long hand that draws his child out of a dungeon". To the writers of the Psalms Yahweh was a redeemer; he was a king and a shepherd. In other words the Hebrew conceived of Yahweh as belonging to his society and social order in a way that is very difficult for the logically oriented mind to grasp. For instance, he spoke to the prophets, he appeared to Abraham, and he could be angry, jealous, and sorry. He was even capable of remembering, and that means that he could also forget. He is capable of loving and even hating someone or something.

Being a personal God, therefore, Yahweh was understood to possess all the extensions of human personality. Because he is 'El the source of power, his own extension of personality is all the more forceful and powerful. His word is most powerful and will never return to him empty. He appeared to men as the *mal'ak* (sometimes translated "angel") to make his purposes known. His personality was also believed to have extended through the ark; on many occasions the movement of the ark was identified with the movement of Yahweh, and it became the symbol of his presence especially in times of national crisis. This explains the advice of the elders to call the ark to the battle during the Philistine invasions. The expected salvation was really to come by the extension of Yahweh's power through the ark. It also explains how the ark could be addressed as Yahweh as it was carried forward at the beginning of a journey, when Moses sang, "Arise, O LORD, and let thy enemies be scattered. . .", and again when it was put to rest, when he said, "Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel" (Num 10.35-36).

### **The extension of personality and translation**

The extension of personality is a very important and serious matter for translation. It makes a big difference whether or not texts containing terms which relate to the extension of personality of God or of people are recognized and translated properly. For instance, if a curse is translated without this understanding, the readers may read it and say, "So what?" But if it is translated properly the response may be "Wow! This is serious!" A few examples will illustrate why I urge special care in the translation of such texts.

**Name.** The word *shem* "name" and the word *qara'* "call" appear together more than 20 times in the book of Genesis; and a careless translation of them may become sacrilegious, at least from the Jewish point of view, when the reference is to Yahweh. Take the Yoruba rendering of Gen 4.26, for example. The text may be rendered as:

(1) *Won bere si pe oruka OLUWA* "They started to call the name of the LORD."

(2) *Wom bere si da oruko OLUWA* "They started to mention the name of the LORD."

(3) *Won bere si pe OLUWA loruko* "They started to call the LORD by his name."

Even if the three variants are correct as far as the meanings of the words are concerned, none of the renderings will be acceptable to the Hebrew way of thinking, because people do not ever utter the name of the LORD. Variant (3) will be abominable in Yoruba, because it will be utterly disrespectful. So each possibility must be carefully examined not only for naturalness and correctness but also for the acceptability of what it says.

As another example, in Gen 12.2 "I will...make your name great", the name actually means the same as the man Abraham. In Yoruba it is the person who is made great, not the name. So the name is replaced with the person named. Similarly the name of the LORD means the same as the LORD himself in passages like "where I choose to put my name", "call upon the name of the LORD", and so on.

**Property.** In translating "all that he has" in Gen 46.1, the emphasis is on all that Jacob had through which he could extend his personality. In rendering this into Yoruba it will be more meaningful to add the expression *atile atona re* "including his house and his road", even though the Yoruba people do not live in movable houses and the road is not movable either. But this expression carries the idea of "all of his sphere of influence".

**Representative.** In translating *mal'ak* "angel" or "messenger" and other related words, great care is needed in choosing the appropriate equivalent in Nigerian languages, especially Yoruba. *Onisé* "one with a message" is higher on the rank of the extension of personality than *iránsé* "messenger" or "servant" or *omo òdò* "house help". A case in point is the servant of Abraham whom he sent to secure Rebekah as a wife for his son Isaac (Gen 24.2). He did not send just any servant, but the trusted servant "that ruled over the house". This fact should be reflected in the choice of the term to be used.

**Word.** Of all the ways in which a person can extend his personality, the one most frequently referred to is the power of words—whether in a vow, a prayer, a blessing, or a curse. The delicateness of spoken words is aptly put in a Yoruba saying: "A word is like an egg: once it slips and falls down it is broken, and once broken it cannot be put together again."

In the translation of every text which involves a blessing, a curse, or other similar utterance, it is essential to state the words in the most natural form in the translator's language which will show the serious nature of the text in the original. This involves the proper choice of words, rhetoric formulas, and style.

When God speaks, for instance, in the African way of thinking he speaks with the authority of a king. He does not need to ask permission from anybody to do what he wants to do. Translators should be aware

of this as they translate the words "Let there be..." in Genesis 1. In checking three different translations I found that the word "let" in English was rendered as though God was seeking permission from someone in order to create the various things that he was making. In each case the extension of his personality comes out more forcefully if the Hebrew is rendered "Be!" and the verb is translated "commanded" rather than "said".

The same is true of texts in which God blesses people and older people bless younger ones. In at least three of the Nigerian languages which I know well, blessings are typically pronounced in either a prophetic past tense or in an authoritative future tense; when older people use these special formulas in blessing younger ones, the one who is blessed feels really blessed.

In many West African languages, prayers, blessings, curses, and sometimes vows are pronounced in poetic forms. Except when it is God himself who is doing the blessing, a lot of divine vocatives are used. In Yoruba, for example, God is called upon by scores and scores of names that are appropriate for the context; metaphors and similes are used profusely. A good example from the Bible is the prelude to Jacob's blessing by Isaac: "See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed. Therefore..." In other words this says, "You are already blessed. These are the results of your blessing."

It is worth noting that the blessing or curse actually takes effect when the formula "You are blessed" or "Blessed are you" is pronounced. That is the point at which the power of the spoken word is believed to have changed the content of a personality for good or for evil, depending on whether the person is blessed or cursed. The expressions of the blessing or curse are actually the results or manifestations of the blessing or curse.

### Conclusion

From personal experience I have discovered that many translators are discouraged from using certain words and ideas in their own languages because these words are said to be "pagan" in origin or "primitive" in their theology. One translator refused to use the regular word for "heaven" because "people go to heaven only when they die, and God is a living God". The translation therefore used the word for "up". So in the church they pray to Our Father who is "up", but in everyday life they pray to God who is in heaven.

Such translators and their advisers will be delivered from their self-made translation prisons when they learn, for instance, that *'el* and *'elohim*, which are the two basic Old Testament words for God, were also the Canaanite words for their gods. The more natural we can make the translation of such serious texts, the more people will identify with these texts and understand them, and the more they will say, "This is indeed our language."