

TAKING THEOLOGY SERIOUSLY IN THE TRANSLATION TASK

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One of the areas of great challenge and sometimes grave disappointments, is that of the relation of theology and translation. As one trained in the biblical field, I have always considered my major contribution to be in the realm of theology, i.e. making sure that the translation of the Biblical text is faithful to the theology of that text. But in this endeavor I have found various factors which may prevent the translation from being completely faithful to the theology of the Biblical text. This article will discuss three of these factors: (1) unjustified theologizing by the translator; (2) making translational decisions in the light of one's own theology, and (3) insufficient exegetical follow-through. The article will end with a section on the implications of these ideas for the translation task as a whole.

I. Unjustified theologizing

By "unjustified theologizing" we mean a conscious effort by a translator to make adjustments in his translation so that his translation would agree with him theologically, would reflect or confirm his theological position, or at least would not contradict or compromise his theological stance. A few examples may be mentioned.

1. A translator wanted to change "baptism of repentance *into* the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1.4) to suit his theological position, namely that forgiveness is prior to baptism, and not a result of it. I jokingly remarked that while that may be the proper Christian doctrine, John the Baptist was not a Christian and should not be made to sound like one; the translator agreed to translate the text as it is. (I did not mention that Peter has exactly the same message in Acts 2.38.)

2. A missionary translator wouldn't consider translating either Gen. 12.3b or 22.18 in the reflexive, because of the danger of supporting the doctrine of universalism. Gen. 12.3b is passive, but Gen. 22.18 is in the hithpael. When this was pointed out to him, he insisted that that was not what the text meant, because the text cannot support a dangerous doctrine like universalism.

3. A translator translated Matthew 6.19 as "Don't gather too much wealth for yourself here on earth," to suit his theological position that wealth is good, and that Jesus did not teach people to become poor.

4. A translator translated Matthew 6.11 as "Give us today everything that we need," with the sure conviction that that was what Jesus meant, and that we shouldn't be praying for just food, but for the fulfilment of all our needs. This translator was further emboldened by the fact that his translation would agree with Luther's shorter catechism.

Other examples can be drawn from published English translations.

5. The Greek of Matthew 1.25 is literally "And he did not know her *until* she gave birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus." The Jerusalem Bible (JB) translation is as follows:

He took his wife home and though he had not had intercourse with her, she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus.

The purpose of the translation is to make the verse support the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, a tradition which is important to the Roman Catholic Church, but which is not in focus in this verse.

In fairness to JB, it should be added that a rather lengthy note on this verse is provided:

Lit. 'and he did not know her until the day she gave birth.' The text is not concerned with the period that followed and, taken by itself, does not assert Mary's perpetual virginity which, however, the gospels elsewhere suppose and which the Tradition of the Church affirms . . .

The Living Bible (LB) is heavily influenced by the translator's theological position. The reader is informed right at the start that the translator's "lode-star" is a "rigid evangelical theology." Some examples:

6. The translator believes that John the disciple is the author of the Fourth Gospel, and that John the disciple is identical with "the beloved disciple." Thus, whenever there is a reference to the beloved disciple, he is clearly identified with John the disciple, who is clearly marked as the author of the Gospel by the use of the first person pronoun (see, e.g. 13.23, 25, 19.26, 27, 20.2ff., 21.2 "my brother James and I"). In 13.23, the translator makes a sweeping statement in the notes: "Literally 'There was one at the table.' *All commentators believe him to be John, the writer of this book.*" (Italics added.)

7. Contradictory details are harmonized, and the apparent contradiction is eliminated from the translation. An example of this is Luke 24.50, which is literally "And he led them out until (as far as) Bethany." The Living Bible rendering is "Jesus led them out along the road to Bethany." This adjustment is made so that the information in Luke will agree with the information in Acts 1.12, where the Ascension occurs at the Mount of Olives, and not at Bethany.

Sometimes texts are harmonized, not because of any theological motive, but simply because of the translator's desire to produce a translation that makes sense. An example is 1 Chronicles 7.15,16, where in verse 15 Maacah is Machir's sister, and in verse 16 she is his wife. In this case, the contradictory pieces of information are so close to each other, that it is perhaps better to make some adjustment in order that verse 16 would agree with verse 15 or vice versa. In the Indonesian project, verse 15 has been made to agree with verse 16, with a note explaining the difficulty. But in the Living Bible, contradictions are either eliminated or explained away. To be fair, we should note that the problem of reading one's theological bias in the translation is not a monopoly of so-called "conservative" translators; it is also apparent in the efforts of people who belong to the historico-critical tradition of Biblical scholarship. However, on the whole, the tendency to make adjustments is found primarily among translators who have a very high regard for the historical reliability of Scripture. The reason is obvious: the Biblical text has to prove or confirm its own nature as an accurate historical account. Therefore contradictions must be only apparent, and can be corrected with the help of other passages in the Bible. It may be admitted there are real contradictions which cannot be explained away, but these are attributed to the errors of scribes and copyists. They can therefore be altered in translation, in order to make the text conform to the original autographs, none of which is extant.

II. Making translational decisions in the light of one's own theology

A more subtle kind of theologizing occurs when the translator allows his theological and cultural position to influence his choice as to the intended meaning of the text. Sometimes this is done unconsciously: the translator automatically chooses an exegetical interpretation that agrees with his own theological position. At other times, there is a conscious effort on the part of the translator: confronted with a variety of options, he chooses the one which agrees with him theologically. Some examples may be given:

1. Romans 9.5. It is interesting to compare the treatment of this ambiguous text in the RSV and in the New International Version (NIV). RSV reads:

... to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever.

The RSV note reads, "or Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever."

NIV, on the other hand, translates the verse:

Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised.

The NIV note reads: "*Or* Christ, who is over all. God be forever praised! *or* Christ. God who is over all be forever praised."

What is true of the RSV and NIV is true of many other translations. The translator's theological position can often be identified by simply reading his translation, and observing how he handles terms like "redemption," "blood," and passages relating to the deity of Christ both from the Old and New Testaments.

2. Ecclesiastes 11.1,2. This illustrates how an exegetical choice is influenced not only by the translator's theology but also by his cultural and political conditioning. The literal translation of these two verses is found in the RSV: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what evil may happen on earth."

There are two main interpretations of these verses:

a. The figure of casting bread upon the water refers to commerce. The verse then can be translated "Send your goods overseas, where the profits are likely to be large." Verse 2 "urges diversifying one's undertakings to reduce the attendant risks" (R. Gordis).

b. They are an exhortation to liberality. Accordingly, verse 2 is interpreted to mean that the generous giver "is advised to give to seven or eight people, because he does not know what evil may overtake him or whom he may need as friends" (ICC, page 182).

a. TEV follows the interpretation preferred by Gordis, and comes out with a very capitalistic concept: "Invest your money in foreign trade, and one of these days you will make a profit. Put your investments in several places—many places even—because you never know what kind of bad luck you are going to have in this world." TEV has no footnote.

Moffatt also prefers this interpretation: "Trust your goods far and wide at sea, till you get good returns after a while. Take shares in several ventures; you never know what will go wrong in this world."

Both of these translations thus give proof-text support for the system of capitalism and free enterprise! "Foreign trade," "investments" and "shares" are very modern terms, reminiscent of Wall Street and multinational corporations!

b. The Living Bible follows the liberality interpretation: "Give generously, for your gifts will return to you later. Divide your gifts among many, for in the days ahead you yourself may need much help." Translating it this way really encourages generous church giving. Here again, there is no note.

My own inclination is to interpret the expression of casting bread upon the waters as a reference to living recklessly, or taking risks. This would agree with the total spirit of Ecclesiastes. Verse 2 then could be interpreted as "Engage in many activities," or "Visit as many places as you can." Such interpretation would agree with verse 4, which has reference to acting even before the conditions are favorable. Verse 6 would be interpreted similarly, i.e. to engage in human activity from morning till night, even though one cannot understand what is going on (verse 5).

But perhaps I too am putting too much of myself and my theology into the text. The important thing to note here is that, confronted with different exegetical options, the translator tends to choose that which agrees with his own theological and cultural conditioning. A person translating in a situation where free enterprise is not practiced, or is regarded negatively, would not translate as Moffatt or TEV has done. On the other hand, to simply ignore the sense that TEV renders is to ignore the opinion of a great number of exegetes. What then is the translator to do?

In considering the relation of translation to the translator's theology the ideal is for the translator to let the Word speak, and to let the translator's theology be informed by the Word rather than trying to make the Word conform to his own theological position. But the realities are far from the ideal. The translator tends to read his own ideas into the text, whether he is aware of it or not. The translator always faces what William Barclay calls "the risk of putting something of himself into the translation" ("On translating the New Testament" in *The New Testament*, vol. 1, 317). And that should be so, because the translator cannot simply approach the text in an absolutely objective manner; in translating, he gets involved with the text.

What then is the way out of this dilemma of reading one's own theology into the translation? Barclay speaks persuasively of "... the mind and heart of the translator married to the mind and heart of the author" (*Ibid.*, 319). He continues:

"Ideally, his (the translator's) mind should be in perfect unison with the mind of the author whom he seeks to translate, even to the extent of sharing, or at least entering into, the experience of the author. Ideally, he should have the courage always to try to state the meaning of the author ... The ideal is unattainable—but that is no reason for not trying to attain it (*Ibid.*).

How then do we attain these goals? The training of translators and the whole program of translator's helps should have as one of their primary aims the task of equipping the translator to share and enter into the experience of the Biblical author.

Immediately, however, we are faced with grave difficulties.

III. Insufficient exegetical follow-through

It is still widely held that exegesis and translation are two separate disciplines, and that a hard line should be drawn between them. This idea is promulgated in exegetical courses in various seminaries. Exegesis, it is said, is for exegetical books, whereas translation should stick to the text.

This hard line between translation and exegesis has been broken somewhat by the principles of dynamic equivalent translation, with their emphasis on the meaning of the text rather than its form. This idea is not new. Jerome, for instance, practiced it in translating Greek into Latin. Unfortunately, he made an exception of the Biblical text. Explaining his procedures, he wrote, "For myself I not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek, *except in the case of Holy Scriptures where even the order of words is a mystery*, I render sense for sense and not word for word" (Letters 57.5, italics added. Quoted by William Barclay, *The New Testament*, Vol. 1, page 314, see also J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome* (London: Duckworth, 1975), esp. Ch. XX.) Jerome's idea of translating Holy Scriptures seems to have become the general principle which has been followed in many translations of the Bible. In a real sense, dynamic equivalence principles have taken Holy Scriptures out of their exceptional place and have treated them like any other literature, in so far as the translation task is concerned. In this endeavor, we have gone a long way.

But it is my opinion that we have not gone far enough in allowing exegesis to influence our translation. One example is the treatment of theological terminology. The TEV New Testament treatment of *dikaïosunē* is well known, and has influenced many translations all over the world. The German common language (GeCL) treatment of *basileia tou theou* (usually translated "God's new world") should also be mentioned, as well as its rendering of various Old Testament theological concepts. But I think we have not yet explored the possibilities of translating meaningfully many other theological terms and concepts. For example, why should "peace" be translated the same way in Luke 2.14 and in Luke 2.29, where the former may refer to a vertical aspect of peace (i.e. relationship with God or messianic salvation), and the latter refers to an inner quality (i.e. contentment, serenity)? Why should "grace" be retained when it refers primarily to God's undeserved love, and restructured everywhere else when it means other things? Why should "glory" be such a sacrosanct word that is retained everywhere except when it means "praise"? Why should "faith" be translated the same in Romans 1.17 and James 2.26, when almost all interpreters are of the opinion that "faith" as Paul uses it is quite different from the way James understands it?

Another example of this hesitance in allowing exegesis to be reflected in translation is in the translation of passages commonly used within the church, and passages which are very theological in content. Among translators I have worked with, there seems to be no hesitance in restructuring non-theological narrative material. Linguistic principles of analysis and restructuring are readily accepted and applied to these types of material. However, these same principles do not seem to be applied rigorously, if at all, when translating passages with heavy theological content. For example, some translators can be very dynamic and creative in translating the first four chapters of Matthew, but when they come to the Beatitudes in chapter 5, and especially the Lord's

Prayer in chapter 6, they seem to forget dynamic principles and retain the *form* of these passages.

What are the reasons for this insufficient exegetical follow-through? We can cite several.

1. Church leadership. Many church leaders are still not ready to accept anything but a formal correspondence translation. And some who accept a dynamic equivalence translation would do so with the condition that theological and liturgical expressions currently used within the church be incorporated in the translation. An example of this case is what happened in one New Testament project I am working with. The translation was not acceptable to church leaders because it failed to use church theological terminology. It so happened that in this area Christians are in the minority and the church developed its own theological terminology, in order to avoid words which are commonly used in the language, but which may be mistakenly associated with non-Christian religions. If church terms were used in the translation, however, "synagogue" would be "church," "worship" would be "Sunday meeting," and "Sabbath" would be "Day of Sunday Meeting."

This is not an isolated case. Our attention has recently been drawn to two other New Testament translations, both of which are practically finished, which are very dynamic in so far as the narrative material is concerned, but are quite literal and wooden when it comes to the letters. Why? we ask, and the answer is, to paraphrase, the TEV, "they are afraid of the church authorities."

2. Inadequate and unsure exegesis. Often when a translator is asked why such a word or verse is not restructured, his answer is that he was not sure of what it meant, and therefore played it safe by translating it literally, even if the translation didn't make any sense.

Many translators hesitate to restructure theological terms for fear of identifying the wrong actor or the wrong goal. "Redemption," for example, is a neutral term, but once it is translated as a verb, e.g. "set free," then the actor has to be clearly stated. Many translators simply retain "faith" as a noun, and hesitate to translate it as a verb, because as a verb, the goal must be made explicit, and often the translator does not want to take the risk involved in doing so. One translator did not want to put in the goal of "love" in I Corinthians 13, because then Paul would be wrong if he said that the most important thing of all is "loving other people."

3. Preconceived ideas of what biblical language should be. Many translators retain theological expressions because they believe that the Bible is a theological book, so that to remove theological terminology would be to make the Bible into something else. Such translators readily accept the analysis of theological passages and terms, but somehow, such analysis is not at all reflected in the actual results of the translation effort. Such analysis belongs to the teaching and preaching ministry of the church, and not to the translation task.

4. There is always the question of "How far can we go?" What are the limits of legitimate translation? Included here is the common and sometimes exaggerated distinction between translation and paraphrase, the latter being usually regarded as unacceptable.

There are of course legitimate dangers here. Sometimes exegesis is too

broadly defined as including supplementary cultural and doctrinal information, so that when such exegetical information is included in the translation, the translation does not seem at all a faithful reflection of the text. It is therefore necessary for exegesis to be clearly defined. One definition that can be offered is that exegesis is determining the meaning of the text as intended by the author to be understood by his readers. Translation then is stating the meaning of the text in such a way as to enable the readers of the translation to gain an understanding of the text similar to that of the original audience. Stated in such a manner, the hard line between exegesis and translation disappears, and exegesis becomes a real tool for a meaningful and faithful translation of the text.

Some implications

What are the implications of all this for the translation task as a whole? Four areas may be mentioned: implications for the translator, for the translation officer, for relationships with church leaders, and for the program of providing helps.

A. Implications for the Translator.

1. Translators must be encouraged to be more involved in the life, thought, and intention of the Biblical author. Here we are talking not only of theoretical involvement, but of spiritual involvement as well.

2. The training of translators should have the above as one of its primary aims.

3. This would also have implications for the recruitment of translators. Translators should not only be intellectually capable of involving themselves with the text, but also spiritually willing to share in the experience of the Biblical author himself.

B. Implications for the Translation Officer (TO).

1. The TO should have more time for detailed research, so that he is constantly informed of recent developments in Biblical scholarship both generally and in his chosen area of specialization.

2. The TO should have time for a more thorough supervision of language projects. Priority should be given where possible on major languages which can be used as model texts by translators in related languages. An example of this is Bahasa Indonesia, which is used as a model text for almost all the other projects within the country, including projects sponsored by other organizations.

C. Implications for our relations with church leaders.

1. There should be a program of information directed primarily at leaders of the church, so that they become aware of translation principles, and more readily accept and support Bible Society efforts in the translation task.

2. Bible Societies should seek where possible to influence seminary curricula and methods of teaching scriptures to ministerial candidates who one day will be influential in the life of the church.

D. Implications for the program of Translator's Helps.

Helps should provide not only translational material, but also theological material, with more thorough discussion of important theological areas.

Helps should be adapted for translators who cannot work with the major languages. In Indonesia, for example, most translators cannot work with any major language. In such a situation, we need Indonesian adaptations of the helps and of selected TBT articles.

Conclusion

Two questions lie beneath the matters discussed in this article. First, does it really make a difference if one is aware of the theology behind the text? Second, how can one be sure of such knowledge when there is so much variety of opinion among scholars? Four points may be made in reply.

1. It should be acknowledged that there is a wide variety of scholarly opinion on the author's intention, the situation of the intended audience, and other areas of Biblical scholarship. But (a) the different scholarly opinions are not usually contradictory but supplementary, and help to shed light on the book and on the Bible as a whole. (b) Even though there is variation, there is often a consensus which can be taken as a guide in the interpretation of a particular book or passage. (c) One should guard against some rather particularistic views, that is, views held only by one or two scholars. Often such views present the eccentricities of scholars rather than serious contributions to the interpretation of a text.

2. Often, a knowledge of the author's intention, the condition of the community to which he wrote, the theological problems facing the community, helps tremendously in making exegetical decisions. For example, exegetical decisions on Matthew's use of "heaven," "righteousness," and the passives of divine avoidance, depend directly on conclusions regarding Matthew's theological intention and the nature of the community to which he addressed his gospel.

3. A knowledge of the author's theological intention often clarifies many confusing aspects of a book especially as it is compared with parallel texts. A translator who had just finished translating Chronicles told me how much it would have helped her had she known of the Chronicler's pro-Davidic bias before she began translating the book. It would have explained many changes which the Chronicler had made in his sources.

4. An intimate knowledge of the author's intention, and the whole theology of a book, helps to foster the translator's personal involvement in the life, thought, and experience of the author, thereby resulting, in not only a more accurate translation, but also in a style that is exciting and alive. It is the translator who gets excited with the text that he is translating who usually produces a lively and exciting translation. And one way to attain this excitement is by personal involvement in the world of the Biblical text.