

PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

*Published twice yearly
(April and October)
by the United
Bible Societies*

Vol. 38, No. 2, April 1987

EDITOR: Euan Fry

DANIEL C. ARICHEA, JR

PEACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Rev. Dr Daniel C. Arichea is the UBS Translation Coordinator for the Asia Pacific Region, based in Hong Kong

The word “peace” (Greek *eirene*) together with its derivatives (the verbs meaning to reconcile, to be at peace, and to make peace) is one of those terms which more often than not is translated literally and concordantly in many translations. That means that in most cases “peace” would be translated with the same word throughout the translation. This tendency to translate “peace” literally does not seem to do justice to the term which in itself is rich with meaning. Furthermore, a literal translation of “peace” often has a negative and somewhat passive connotation: it refers to the absence of something undesirable rather than the presence of something desired.

The concept of “peace” in the Old Testament primarily refers to wholeness, total health, total welfare. It covers the sum total of God’s blessings to a person who belongs to the covenant community. Our focus of attention in this short study is New Testament usage, which in some ways reflects the Old Testament understanding but which also reflects further enrichment of the term as a result of the influence of non-Jewish factors.

The term “peace” is used in the New Testament in at least five different ways: (1) peace as the absence of war or chaos, (2) peace as a right relationship with God or with Christ; (3) peace as a good relationship among people; (4) peace as an individual virtue or state, that is, tranquillity or serenity; and (5) peace as part of a greeting formula.

Peace as the absence of war or chaos

This is the usual way in which “peace” was understood in the Greek language of Jesus’ day. In ordinary speech today, this seems also to be the primary connotation of “peace” in many languages, including English itself. In the New Testament, however, there are only a few

instances where this meaning is intended. The following are two of these instances.

Acts 9.31 "And so it was that the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had a time of peace."

This was right after Saul the persecutor of the church was converted and became a leading member of the Christian community. "Peace" in this context could very well mean the absence of persecution.

Acts 12.20 "Then they (the people of Tyre and Sidon) went to Herod and asked him for peace, because their country got its food supplies from the king's country."

"Peace" here obviously means the cessation of hostilities between King Herod and the people of Tyre and Sidon.

Peace as a right relationship with God or with Christ

This is the vertical dimension of "peace". In this sense, it is very close to "reconciliation" (as in 2 Corinthians 5.17-21) and "righteousness" when used to refer to God's act of putting people into a right relationship with himself (as in Romans 1.17). In dynamic equivalent translations, it is possible to translate these terms with similar expressions. Some examples:

Romans 5.1 "Now that we have been put right with God through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Here "peace with God" is the result of "being put right with God". The two expressions however are parallel in meaning: since God has now restored us into a right relationship with himself, we now live in a state of harmony with God; he is no longer the angry God who wants to judge and punish us, but has become for us the heavenly Father who loves and cares for us.

Acts 10.36 "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, proclaiming the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all."

Here "peace" is more clearly God's act of restoring people into a right relationship with himself. Therefore "the good news of peace through Jesus Christ" can be translated "the good news that through Jesus Christ God has restored people into a right relationship with himself".

Romans 8.6 "To be controlled by human nature results in death; to be controlled by the Spirit results in life and peace."

"Peace" here is more properly "peace with God" rather than a personal virtue. So we can restructure: "to be controlled by God's Spirit results in life and a right relationship with God."

Peace as good relationship among people

This is a logical and natural extension of the meanings we have already looked at. The absence of war does not necessarily mean the presence of right relationships but it can result in that. On the other hand, a right relationship with God should result in good relationships between people. Some examples:

2 Corinthians 13.11 "And now, my brothers, good-bye! Strive for perfection; listen to my appeals; agree with one another; live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you."

This is an appeal to the Corinthian Christians to live in harmony with one another. This was a message needed by the Corinthian church because of the presence of divisions and schisms within the fellowship. The "God of love and peace" would be the God who makes it possible for people to love one another and to live in harmony with one another.

Mark 9.50 "Have the salt of friendship among yourselves, and live in peace with one another."

Here again, "live in peace" means positively to live in harmony, and negatively, to avoid any action that would cause disharmony or contention.

Matthew 5.9 "Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children."

The unstated object of "peace" is "people", hence "those who work for peace among people", or "those who make it possible for people to live together in harmony", or "those who make it possible for people to have good relationships among themselves".

1 Corinthians 7.15 "God has called you to live in peace."

The context of this statement is the relationship between husband and wife, especially if one of them is a Christian and the other an unbeliever. "Peace" therefore has as its meaning here the harmony in the marriage relationship. William Barclay translates this as follows: "God meant marriage to be a perfect human relationship between two people."

Ephesians 4.3 "Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together."

"The peace that binds you together" is a figure of speech in which "peace" (or harmony, or right relationships) is compared to a cord that ties people together. Again, the translation of William Barclay is worth quoting: "I urge you to be eager to preserve that unity which the Spirit can give, a unity in which you are bound together in a perfect relationship to one another."

Colossians 3.15 "The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body."

Here again Barclay translates the intent of the verse: "Only Christ can enable men to live in a right relationship with each other. It is this unifying power of his which must dictate your every decision, for you were meant to be one united body."

Peace as a Christian virtue, hence "serenity", "tranquillity", "peace of mind"

This aspect of "peace" is not part of the meaning of the term in either Hebrew or Greek. That is perhaps the reason why many scholars are hesitant to recognize the presence of this particular meaning in the New Testament. It is possible, however, that this is a distinctively

Christian meaning, and therefore its absence in either Hebrew or Greek is not sufficient reason for dismissing it as not valid. In many verses it is quite obvious that this meaning of peace as “serenity” or “tranquillity” is intended. The following are some examples:

Galatians 5.22 “But the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...”

In this verse and the next Paul enumerates the “fruits” of the Spirit, that is, the individual virtues that characterize the life of a person who is controlled by God’s Spirit. It is not possible to take “peace” here as “right relationship with God”, for it is assumed that the person is already in a right relationship with God, and therefore “peace” together with the other virtues is a result of that right relationship. It is of course possible to take “peace” here as “right relationship with people”, but it is more likely that since it is associated with love, joy, patience, and so on, that perhaps it should be taken also as an individual virtue and interpreted as “serenity.”

Romans 14.17 “For God’s Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of the righteousness, peace, and joy which the Holy Spirit gives.”

Here again “peace” is an individual virtue, associated with “righteousness” (or goodness) and “joy”. The whole verse can then be restructured: “When people acknowledge God as their king, what they are allowed to eat or drink is no longer important; what is important is that through God’s Spirit these people live good, serene and joyful lives.”

Romans 15.13 “May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Here again, “peace” together with joy is a result of faith in God. It is possible to understand “peace” here as “wholeness”, which would relate it to the Old Testament usage of the term. It is more likely, however, that “peace” here is understood as an individual virtue.

John 14.27 “Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid.”

Here “peace” is clearly contrasted with worry and fear. The whole verse can be restructured thus: “Peace of mind (or serenity) is what I leave with you. The peace of mind that comes from me—this is what I am giving to you. Do not be afraid, worried or upset.”

Peace as part of a greeting formula

When “peace” is part of a greeting formula, then what is important is not so much its meaning as its function within the formula. Some examples:

1 Peter 1.2 “May grace and peace be yours in full measure.”

This formula seems to be one of the traditional Christian greetings, since it is found in many other New Testament letters. “Grace” translates an

expression which is commonly used as a word of greeting among Greeks. "Peace" on the other hand comes from a common Hebrew greeting word. These two words are combined to form a traditional Christian greeting. It is quite tempting to take these two words in their full theological meaning and impact (as for example "God's undeserved love" for "grace", and "God's gift of wholeness and health" for "peace.") However, since we are dealing with a greeting formula, these words must be translated according to their meaning and function within the formula. For example, "May God be good to you and bless you," or "May God show his love to you and be good to you."

Matthew 10.12 "When you go into a house, say, 'Peace be with you.' " This is obviously a formula used to greet people inside a house. It is therefore possible to translate the expression with its closest natural equivalent, or if that is not possible, to simply restructure it with another greeting formula, as for example, "God bless you." The important thing is that whatever expression is used must be understood by the readers as a greeting formula.

Some examples from Luke's Gospel

The range of varying meanings and functions of the word "peace" is apparent in the Gospel of Luke. Some examples:

Luke 1.78-79 "He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the path of peace."

Here, "peace" has the meaning of messianic salvation or right relationship with God.

Luke 2.14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased."

Here, "peace" may mean "right relationship with God", or "right relationship among people".

Luke 2.28-29 "Simeon took the child in his arms and gave thanks to God: 'Now, Lord, you have kept your promise, and you may let your servant go in peace.' "

Here "peace" means "serenity" or "contentment". Simeon's statement can then be restructured: "Let your servant die content." (Incidentally, is it appropriate to use this as a formula for closing a worship service, as some do?)

Luke 10.5 "Whenever you go into a house, first say, 'Peace be with this house.' "

This is clearly a greeting formula, and can be translated with the use of the closest natural equivalent greeting in the language of the translation.

Luke 24.36 "While the two were telling them this, suddenly the Lord himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' "

This is also a greeting formula, which translates literally the Hebrew expression *Shalom aleichem*. Here it may be possible to use a similar expression like "May God bless you", as long as such expressions function as greeting formulas within the language concerned.

Implications for translation

Since "peace" is an ambiguous term, with varying meanings depending on the context, it is important for the translator to understand the meaning and function of the term in a particular context and translate it accordingly. A literal translation of the term would give the impression that it has only one meaning, and the resulting translation would not help the reader in comprehending the meaning of the term.

It should be added that the suggestions above are appropriate for dynamic equivalent translations, which put emphasis not on the form but on the meaning of the biblical text. In formal correspondence translations, where the intent is to stay as close as possible to the form of the biblical text, then "peace" would be translated in a concordant manner, that is, whenever "peace" appears, it is translated by the same word. In a dynamic equivalent translation, however, every effort must be made to translate the term so that its meaning becomes clear in every context. Only in this way can we do justice to the richness of the word and at the same time make sure that the various meanings and functions of the word are appreciated and understood by the readers of the translation.

WILLIAM L. WONDERLY

POETRY IN THE BIBLE: CHALLENGE TO TRANSLATORS

Dr William L. Wonderly is a retired UBS Translation Consultant now living in the United States

One of the greatest challenges to translators of the Bible is the handling of its poetic sections. Not only the Psalms, but about one third of the entire Old Testament, was written in Hebrew as poetry. Included are Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and a large part of the prophetic books, besides brief poetic passages in the other books. The New Testament also contains a number of passages that are poetic in style.

It is generally considered that in translating for dynamic (or functional) equivalence we pay primary attention to the content, or meaning, of the message, rather than to the external form of the original. But with poetry the problem is that important shades of meaning are communicated by means of the form itself. And it is difficult if not impossible to keep in a translation the formal poetical features that are used in the original to convey that meaning. This is because each language has its own ways of expressing shades of meaning by means of such formal features, and in poetry, even if we were able to reproduce the poetic form of the Hebrew text in our translation, it would probably not communicate the same meaning as it did in the original. In