

Integrity of the text

The integrity of the message of the discourse unit as found in its biblical context must be maintained. It is not acceptable to lift pieces of text out of the Bible, to give them a life of their own without reference to the context from which they come. The intended meaning of a scripture passage as found in its biblical context should be conveyed accurately. The text should not distort the message of the larger section from which the selection is taken.

In some cases readers may need to be helped to understand the message of the book from which a passage is taken. Introductory or bridge materials can be used to maintain the integrity of the original discourse unit and to give the Selection completeness as a unit of text on its own. An introduction can help the reader relate the text of the Selection to the context it has been taken from, and help to give the right focus to the theme of the Selection.

Non-consecutive text

When more than one passage from Scripture is used in the Selection (that is, non-consecutive texts linked by a common theme or topic), we need to make sure that there is a cohesive theme in the Selection. And the different origins of the chosen texts should be clearly identified.

Format matters

Print size and coloring must be clear and legible, and care should be taken to avoid having the design give prominence to inappropriate parts of the text.

Scripture version used

The text of Scripture prepared for or used in a Selection should be a version that has been approved by the appropriate authorities.

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THE OLD TESTAMENT: SOME TRANSLATIONAL ISSUES

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In my work with translators, particularly with the Indonesian Common Language Old Testament committee, I have become very aware of translation problems that are specially related to the Old Testament. Two of these problems are going to be discussed in this article: Old Testament quotations and allusions in the New Testament, and seeming inconsistencies within the Old Testament.

Regarding the first problem, the observation is made that a New Testament quotation often does not agree with its Old Testament

counterpart. The problem is made more serious by the fact that sometimes a particular theological idea which the New Testament text wants to bring out is either not obvious or else absent in the Hebrew text.

With regard to the second problem, translators are bothered and are not too sure as to how to deal with seeming discrepancies within the Old Testament record, whether these are found within one book (such as the varying details in the flood account in Genesis 6-9), or in different books (the differences in detail between Kings and Chronicles). Should these discrepancies be left alone, or should they be reconciled in some way in the translation task?

These matters are serious issues, especially when viewed from a particular position regarding the nature of the Bible as the Word of God. It is often asserted that an important aspect of the declaration that "the Bible is the Word of God" is that the Bible must have the component of "accuracy". Concerning the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, "accuracy" would mean among other things, that when Old Testament passages are quoted in the New Testament, the New Testament quotation and the Old Testament passage must be in complete agreement, both in wording and in interpretation. If this is not the case, then it becomes a theological problem for translators, which they either ignore or try to resolve in various ways, and one way out is to make adjustments in the Old Testament passage so that it agrees with its New Testament counterpart.

The Old Testament texts: levels of meaning

In the light of our discussion above, how then should an Old Testament text be translated, whether such a text be within the Old Testament itself, or whether it is quoted in a New Testament book?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to consider what level of meaning we are interested in when we translate an Old Testament text. This is necessary because the formation of the Old Testament includes several stages, each stage representing a level of meaning. We can, for example, talk of the following levels of meaning when dealing with an Old Testament text:

1. the meaning intended by sources (which sometimes can be discovered, but often is impossible to recover)
2. the meaning intended by the writers or editors
3. the meaning intended by the final editor
4. the meaning intended (understood) by the believing community when they accepted this text as Scripture
5. the meaning intended by the whole canon
6. the meaning intended by New Testament writers
7. the meaning intended by a modern interpreter within a modern community of faith.

Which of these levels of meaning are we translating? In what follows I will suggest certain principles dealing with this whole matter of translating

the Old Testament. These principles are suggestions rather than “laws”, but are being put forward in order to open up the discussion on how the Old Testament should be translated as accurately and responsibly as possible.

Translating passages within the Old Testament

1. The Old Testament must be translated primarily as Jewish or Hebrew Scripture. While the Old Testament is part of the Christian canon, and can be interpreted as such, it is much more useful to translate the Old Testament as if it were alone and not part of the whole Bible. This approach would guarantee that the Old Testament meaning (meanings 2 and 3 above) is made primary in the translation task.

2. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament is the basic text to be translated. This would mean that whenever there is a difference between the Hebrew text and other versions or translations (such as the Septuagint), then it is the Hebrew text that should prevail. This principle is very important when translating Old Testament passages which are quoted in the New Testament, since New Testament writers often quote not from the Hebrew text, but from the Septuagint.

3. Whenever there are differences in so far as detailed information is concerned, these should not be harmonized. This holds true for differences which are found within the same book or between different books. The Old Testament material has come down to us already with these differences, and the translator has to be faithful to this particular characteristic of the Old Testament.

4. There should be no attempt to produce a “Christianized” Old Testament. The Old Testament should be translated in such a way as to reflect in the translation any moral and theological ideas which are present in the Old Testament books, even though these ideas may be considered pre-Christian, or even anti-Christian.

5. Distinctive Christian concepts and vocabulary should not be used in the translation of Old Testament texts. Terms such as “Christ”, “Spirit” (with a capital S), “Holy Spirit”, “church”, and others have special Christian usage, and therefore should be avoided in the translation of the Old Testament.

6. Regarding passages in the Old Testament which are quoted or alluded to in the New Testament, every effort should be made to translate these passages naturally in their Old Testament contexts, rather than in the light of their usage and interpretation in the New Testament.

7. Finally, we must translate the form and the meaning of the text at the time when it was received as Scripture by the confessing community (meaning 4 in the levels above). In many and perhaps most cases the meaning on this level will be the same as the meaning in level 3 (the final editor) and to a certain extent level 2, but it is still true to say that these levels of meaning are not the primary object of the translation task. In form, however, there would be considerable differences between level 4 and the previous levels. And it is important to recognize that when we translate any Old Testament book, we take seriously the form it took when it was

recognized as Scripture by the confessing community. For example, while recognizing the validity of the conclusion of modern biblical scholarship that the book of Isaiah may have been written by more than one person, in the translation task the object of our concern is the book of Isaiah as one book, since that is the canonical shape or form that was received as Scripture by the confessing community.

New Testament passages which are quoted from the Old Testament

1. When translating a New Testament passage which is quoted from the Old Testament, we must translate the meaning intended by the New Testament text, regardless of whether it agrees with the intention of the Old Testament text or not.

2. New Testament passages which are quoted from the Old Testament must be translated as Old Testament texts, written by Old Testament writers, and not by Christian writers. These quotations are taken seriously by New Testament writers as having originated from a specific period in Israel's history. Therefore, they must not be Christianized by reading Christian concepts into them, or by using distinctive Christian vocabulary in the translation.

What this all means is that when a translator is translating the Old Testament, including Old Testament quotations within the New Testament, he must translate it primarily as Jewish scripture, and only secondarily as Christian scripture. The translator must avoid the temptation to read the Old Testament into the New Testament or to read the New Testament into the Old Testament. In this way, the integrity of the Old Testament as Jewish scripture and eventually as part of the Christian canon, is not at all compromised in the translation task.

Some additional comments

Having said all that, I will now add some comments qualifying the above suggestions.

1. Where it is possible on textual, exegetical and linguistic grounds to harmonize Old Testament texts with their New Testament counterparts, then this should be done. What this means is that if the Hebrew text of the Old Testament can be translated in the same way as the Greek text in the New Testament, without any compromise in so far as text, language, and exegesis are concerned, then the Old Testament text should be translated in the same way as its New Testament counterpart. If the Old Testament text allows for other interpretations, then these alternatives should be placed as notes to the Old Testament text, but **not** to the New Testament text.

2. This principle at least opens the possibility for harmonization of the Old Testament text with its New Testament counterpart. There are dangers in this proposal, but used with care, it offers great possibilities. What this proposal does not allow is to read the Old Testament into the New Testament, that is, to change the New Testament passages quoted from the Old Testament so that they agree with their Hebrew counterparts.

3. Where it is possible on textual, exegetical and linguistic grounds to

translate a text in such a way as to allow a possible interpretation which is already prevalent in the Christian faith, then this may be done. However two things must be kept in mind. Firstly, the phrase “already prevalent in the Christian faith” is very important in this proposal. What is meant here is not an isolated idiosyncrasy of some small group, but an interpretation which is held by a large number within the Christian faith. Moreover, such an interpretation must be something that can stand the test when judged by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, in no case must the Old Testament meaning become secondary to the Christian meaning. At this point we see more clearly the distinction between the task of exegesis and translation and the task of theology and proclamation. Exegesis in the strict sense is the exact interpretation of a text in its original meaning, whereas theology and proclamation are endeavors which relate a text to a particular situation. In this latter activity, we may either stick to the original meaning or go beyond it, so that the text becomes a modern text. A good translation does not make the text modern; it does, however, open up the text for relevant and meaningful interpretation and proclamation.

Some examples

It remains for us to test the above proposals by examining some texts.

Gen 1.2 *ruach Elohim*

The traditional translation of this expression is “the Spirit of God” (RSV, KJV, NIV; Moffatt, “the spirit of God”; JB, “God’s spirit”). Some interpreters understand this expression to mean not God’s spirit, but an awesome wind, taking it not as a part of God’s activity, but as a part of the total picture of chaos portrayed in the first verse. It should be noted that this interpretation avoids the problem of making God the author of chaos, and accents the fact that God’s act of creation is primarily to bring order out of the disorder in the earth. In the light of this discussion, what are the translational possibilities?

1. If we come to the exegetical conclusion that the expression *ruach elohim* means God’s spirit (or spirit), then the translation must reflect this exegetical conclusion. We should be conscious, however, of the problem which arises when the expression is translated as God’s Spirit (with a capital S), for that is tantamount to Christianizing the text, since the Old Testament does not normally speak of the Spirit of God in a personalized manner. It would be better to translate it as God’s spirit (with a small s), or God’s power, which is a primary meaning of spirit in the Old Testament. Some translations have rendered “spirit” as a verb: “God had power (or control) over all this.” In any case, translating the expression as God’s spirit or God’s power would indicate that this is not part of the picture of chaos described in verse 1, but rather, it would show that despite the chaos, God is still in control. In this case, it would be more appropriate to use “but” as the connective (see Moffatt) rather than “and” (as in GNB).

2. If however, we come to the exegetical conclusion that the meaning of the expression is “an awesome wind”, then this too has to be reflected in the translation. This would mean that the translation should be faithful to the meaning of the Hebrew expression even if in the process it does not support some theological interpretations which are derived from a different translation of the same expression.

3. A third possibility is that if there is a language similar to Hebrew where “wind” and “spirit” are rendered by the same word, then this word can be used in the translation, if it is natural in this context.

4. It is perhaps best that whatever meaning has been chosen, there should be a note indicating the various other alternatives.

Gen 1.26 “Let us make man in our own image”

There are at least four possible interpretations of the plural form.

1. It implies a discussion between God and his heavenly court, meaning the heavenly beings who stand around the Deity and constitute his council. This is difficult to accept, since God alone acts in creation.

2. The plural is reflexive: God is talking to himself, and the plural is a form of “plural of majesty”.

3. The plural form can be explained as a grammatical matter. Since the common Hebrew term for “God”, namely *Elohim*, is plural in form, so God at times is depicted as speaking in the plural form. The plural is a rhetorical device. A commentator has written: “A man today who deliberates on a course of action is as likely to say ‘Let’s do it!’ as he is to say ‘I’ll do it!’ ‘What shall we do?’ comes as naturally to the lips of the perplexed soul as ‘What shall I do?’ . . . It is the deliberative sort of language that turns up elsewhere in the Bible. In Gen 11.7 the divine counsel finds expression in a ‘let us’ when it is nevertheless evident that Yahweh alone is speaking to himself. Is 6.8 manages to combine singular and plural in the same self-query: ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’ Presumably nothing more is at stake here than the same kind of rhetoric.”

4. Many Christians, from the early church fathers to the present, have seen in these plural pronouns an allusion to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

What then are the translational possibilities?

1. If we come to the exegetical conclusion that the plural form here refers to God talking to his heavenly court, then the plural form will have to be retained in translation, with a note. However, as indicated above, this meaning is not very likely.

2. If we come to the exegetical conclusion that the plural form here is a device by which God is referring to himself, then two possibilities are

open to the translator. If such a plural form exists in his language and can be naturally used, then the translator should be encouraged to use it here, since that would not be a violation of the intention of the biblical text.

The problem arises, however, when such a device is not present in a language, or if it is not natural to use it in this context. To retain the grammatical form of the Hebrew results in a misunderstanding of the intention of the biblical text. In such a case, since the biblical meaning is primary, the logical choice is to change the plural into the singular, perhaps with a note explaining the Hebrew plural form.

Ps 45.6 (quoted in Heb 1.8)

Most translators and interpreters understand Heb 1.8 to be “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever.” (There are some exceptions, notably Moffatt and Goodspeed, “God is your throne forever and ever.”) GNB has “Your kingdom, O God, will last forever and ever.” with a note: **or** “God is your kingdom.”

In the Old Testament counterpart of this verse, found in Ps 45.6, some translations have exactly the same thing as that in Heb 1.8 (Goodspeed, NIV, NAB, JB). Others translate differently; for instance, “Your throne shall stand for evermore” (Moffatt), “Your throne is like God’s throne, eternal” (NEB), “Your divine throne endures forever and ever” (RSV, with note: “or Your throne is a throne of God”, **or** “Thy throne, O God”), “The Kingdom that God has given you will last forever and ever” (GNB, with note: **or** “Your kingdom, O God”, **or** “Your divine kingdom.”)

There is no question about the possibility of translating the Hebrew text of Ps 45.6 in the same way as the Greek text of Heb 1.8. The main problem is whether such a translation would fit the context of the Psalm. Ps 45 is a Psalm addressed to the king, perhaps to David, or perhaps to a king in the Davidic line. The question then arises as to whether it is appropriate to address the king as God. Many commentaries recognize that the king is never addressed as God in the Old Testament, and therefore this verse would be unique if translated in the same way as Heb 1.8.

In the light of this discussion, what are the possibilities in the translation of Ps 45.6?

1. If we come to the exegetical conclusion that the king should not be addressed as God, and that therefore a different reading of the text is more appropriate in the light of the whole Psalm, then this conclusion must be reflected in the translation. In such a case, there should perhaps be a note as to the possibility of translating this verse in the same way as Heb 1.8.

2. If, however, we do not find any difficulty in having the king addressed as “God”, then we should also not find any difficulty in translating this verse exactly as Heb 1.8, since such a translation will then be justified, not on theological grounds or primarily by a desire to harmonize the Old Testament with the New Testament, but on textual, exegetical and linguistic grounds.

Ps 110.1 compared with Acts 2.34

The New Testament use of Ps 110.1 is obviously a reference to Jesus as the Messiah. Most translations consulted for this article indicate this clearly by capitalizing both the first and the second occurrence of **Lord**; for example GNB: "The Lord said to my Lord."

The Old Testament counterpart is the beginning of an enthronement Psalm, with the subject of the Psalm being the king. The GNB makes this reference clear: "The Lord said to my lord, the king." Some other translations are not so direct, although the second **lord** is not capitalized, for example RSV: "The Lord says to my lord." Some other translations capitalize **Lord** in both occurrences.

NIV: The Lord says to my Lord.

NAB: The Lord said to my Lord.

JB: Yahweh's oracle to you, my Lord.

What then are the possibilities of translating this verse?

1. Reading New Testament vocabulary into the verse should be avoided. An example of a translation which reads Christian vocabulary into this verse is seen in the Living Bible: "The Lord says to my Lord, the Messiah."

2. Capitalizing the second **Lord** can be interpreted as harmonizing the Old Testament verse with its New Testament counterpart on theological grounds, and therefore should also be avoided.

3. Since the Old Testament meaning is primary, the GNB translation is justified and is perhaps the best way of avoiding any misunderstanding of the verse.

4. It is possible to translate the verse literally, without capitalizing the second **lord**, and with a note explaining that the second lord refers to the king. While this is not as good as making explicit the meaning of the verse, yet this can be justified on the grounds that since this verse is quoted several times in the New Testament, keeping it as close as possible with the New Testament rendering is desirable, provided that this is justified on textual, exegetical and linguistic grounds.

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Translating the Old Testament can be a very exciting task. My purpose in putting forward the suggestions above is to add to that excitement, and in addition, to help guarantee that Old Testament translations are faithful to the meaning and intention of the Old Testament text.