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TRANSLATING HYMNIC MATERIALS: Theology and Translation in 1 Timothy 3.16

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Poetic materials always present special challenges to translators. Some of the concerns are: determining the nature, structure, and function of the poetic material; defining the relationships between the various lines, for instance in terms of parallelism and contrast; ascertaining the relationship between the poetic material and its immediate context as well as the whole composition; and finally, deciding on how to render the poetic material in the receptor language, so that its meaning and function are clearly communicated to the intended audience. This last concern can only be achieved as a result of proper and adequate attention to the first three, since it is through an accurate analysis of the text that a correspondingly accurate translation can be achieved.

As printed in the UBS Greek NT, the Pastoral Letters contain only two passages that are indented in such a way as to signal that they are poetic—1 Tim 3.16 and 2 Tim 2.11-13. This does not mean that there are no other poetic materials in the Pastoral Letters, but it does mean that as far as the editors of the UBS Greek NT are concerned, the above passages are obviously poetic and therefore formatted as such. The concern of this paper is the first of these two passages, namely, 1 Tim 3.16, which is quoted below in the RSV and the GNT.

RSV:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

GNT:

No one can deny how great is the secret of our religion:

He appeared in human form,
was shown to be right by the Spirit,
and was seen by angels.
He was preached among the nations,
was believed in throughout the world,
and was taken up to heaven.

“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion.” Thus is introduced this first poetic material in the Pastoral Letters. And it is a fitting introduction, especially as we remember that the greatest concern of the Pastorals was the preservation of the truth of the Christian faith that was being threatened by the activities of heretical teachers who were introducing various perversions in order to justify their indulgence in morally questionable conduct. Since it is the content of the Christian faith that was being undermined by these false teachers, it was therefore important for this content to be presented in such a way as to be clearly understood and accepted as the appropriate criterion for true teaching. Thus the importance of the above introductory statement, the first four words of which represent the Greek expression *homologoumenōs mega* (lit. “confessedly great”), signaling that the poetic material that follows contains reliable truth that is affirmed by the Christian community, and any diversion from which would be disastrous to one’s faith.

The scholarly consensus regarding this particular poetic material is that it is a hymn rather than a creedal statement. The difference between these two types of composition is that a creedal statement is usually in prose form and tends to avoid unnecessary ambiguities. An example of such a creedal statement is 1 Tim 2.5: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ” (RSV). A hymn, on the other hand, uses poetic features such as compression, parallelism, play on words, and balanced grammatical constructions. Furthermore, a hymn was constructed in such a way that it could be sung especially when Christians gathered together for worship. In the present case, the balanced form is shown by the fact that each of the six lines comprises a third person singular aorist passive verb and a dative noun that is preceded by the preposition *en* (except for the fourth line, for which see discussion below). Furthermore, the nouns in the first two lines as well as in the last two lines are singular, while those in the third and fourth lines are plural. A further feature is the absence of the definite article which would have been required had this passage been prose rather than poetic material.

Regarding the source and origin of this hymn, there is no consensus as to whether it was an original composition of the author of the Pastoral Letters, or whether it was a quotation from some other source. Furthermore, there is no agreement as to whether this is a self-contained hymn or simply a part of a longer hymn. This latter position is made possible by the fact that the hymn starts with the relative masculine pronoun *hos* (literally “which” or “who”) which should logically connect the hymn to the immediately preceding passage. However, this is not possible, since there is no participant mentioned there, nor is there a masculine pronoun to match *hos*. What it does have is the word “mystery” which is neuter in the Greek, and cannot therefore be grammatically connected with the masculine *hos*. It is these difficulties that have given rise to two variant readings. On the one hand, the reading *theos* “God” removes the ambiguity of *hos* and at the same time makes this passage a complete entity. On the other hand, changing the masculine pronoun *hos* to the neuter pronoun *ho* “which,” smoothes out the connection of the text to what

immediately precedes, and makes it possible for “mystery” to become the subject of the hymn.

Against the position that this is a fragment of a larger hymn is the claim that some New Testament hymns and creedal formulas in fact begin with *hos*, as for example, Phil 2.6 and Col 1.15. It must be noted, however, that in both of these passages, the antecedent of *hos* is clearly marked, since there is already a reference to Christ in the part immediately preceding the hymn. This is not the case however in the passage we are considering.

But whether it is a fragment or an independent whole, this hymn is about Jesus Christ. The six lines of the hymn present a succinct summary of events related to him and the community of faith that came into being through faith in him. The first line obviously refers to the incarnation event, that is, the coming of Jesus Christ into the world as a human being (which is what “flesh” is in this context). Thus in capsule form, this first line captures the content of such passages as John 1.1-18 and Phil 2.6-8. (I should note that here, and in what follows, I am not suggesting that any of the authors of the passages mentioned necessarily knew or deliberately echoed the other texts, but rather that they reflect common strands in first-century belief about Christ.) The line affirms not only Christ’s humanity, but much more than that, for it clearly implies that before Christ became a human being, he was something else. In affirming Christ’s humanity, this first line also clearly affirms, albeit implicitly, Christ’s pre-existent nature as divine.

The second line refers either to the vindication of Christ by the Holy Spirit, or the vindication of Christ’s divine nature. In either case, the event that is used to vindicate Christ is the resurrection. This matter will be further discussed below.

The third line reminds us of the place of angels in the various stages of the life of Jesus Christ: in the announcement of his birth, in his temptation (Mark 1.12-13), and in his resurrection (Mark 16.5-8; Luke 24.4-7; John 20.12, 13). This further reminds us of the triumph of Christ over angels and other spiritual powers in the heavenly realm, something which is noted quite prominently in the New Testament letters (see e.g., Col 2.10, 15; 1 Pet 3.22; Heb 1.4-6.) But it is quite possible that the primary reference here is to the ascension. As Jesus sits on the heavenly throne beside the heavenly Father, he would of course be surrounded by the heavenly angelic court who would bestow on him the appropriate adoration and praise. Thus these first three lines form a summary of the life of Jesus Christ: his incarnation, his resurrection, and finally, his ascension.

The fourth and fifth lines deal with the proclamation of Christ and the result of such proclamation. “Nations” can be taken either generally as referring to non-Jews, or specifically to the heathen (so JB “pagans”). Here perhaps the more generic meaning of “nations” is what is intended, and most translations take it in this sense. However, if this fourth line is contrasted with line 3, then a translation like “pagans” or “heathen” would be more appropriate, since this would accent the contrast between the “nations” and “angels.” Angels are very close to God, whereas the heathen don’t know God at

all. Furthermore, angels are able to see Christ directly, whereas the heathen only hear about him, if at all.

“Believed” is used here in the sense of having trust, confidence, and commitment to Christ. “World” refers to the physical inhabited earth, since it is the inhabitants who do the believing (so JBP “believed in throughout the world”).

Thus in two lines, we are presented with a summary of the whole book of Acts which records how the gospel spread from Jerusalem and Judea to the ends of the earth.

Finally, the last line speaks about Christ’s final triumph and exaltation. The verb “taken up” is also used in Acts 1.2 and Mark 16.19 to refer to the ascension of Christ into heaven, there to reign with God his Father. It is noted by some interpreters that this last line is not chronologically ordered, since it comes after proclamation and reception. This comment would be justified if this last line refers exclusively to the ascension of Christ as a historical event. It is possible, however, to interpret this last line eschatologically as referring not simply to the ascension but to Christ’s final triumph and exaltation at the end of the age. This event is foreshadowed by the ascension, which explains why it is spoken of as something that has already occurred. The use of “glory” here indicates that when Christ is exalted, he is given the privilege of being in the very presence of God, and sharing in the power and greatness of God himself. We have here then a very concise summary of the Christian hope that at the end of the age, the last word will be Christ exalted, triumphant, and enthroned. This last line also serves as a concluding doxology, which is a common feature in New Testament hymns (cf. e.g. Phil 2.5-11).

As to how these lines are related to one another and what structure they portray, there are three possibilities to consider.

1. The hymn consists of a series of six separate but related single lines that describe events related to Christ and the community which was called into being because of what Christ has done. As already discussed, the first line deals with the incarnation, the second line with the resurrection, the third line with the ascension, the fourth line with proclamation, the fifth line with appropriation in terms of faith, and the last line with final triumph.
2. These six lines consist of two stanzas of three lines each. This is in fact the way both the UBS Greek NT and the GNT are formatted. The first stanza deals with Christ’s incarnation and earthly ministry, concluding with his ascension into heaven where he is glorified by angelic powers; and the second stanza deals with how Christ is proclaimed and believed on earth, and once again concluding with his final triumph and exaltation in heaven. The following diagram portrays this two three-line stanza structure, depicting a double “aab” pattern:

From incarnation to ascension

a	manifested in the flesh	- earth
a’	vindicated in the spirit	- earth
b	seen by angels	- heaven

From ascension to Final Triumph

a	preached among nations	- earth
a'	believed in the world	- earth
b	taken up in glory	- heaven

3. The hymn consists of three equal couplets, with one line of each couplet focusing on earth and the other line focusing on heaven. Each couplet therefore presents a particular contrast to achieve this earth-heaven focus. The first couplet contrasts “flesh” with “spirit,” the second, “angels” and “nations,” and the third, “world” and “glory.” The resulting structure is as follows:

earthly	- heavenly	(couplet 1)
heavenly	- earthly	(couplet 2)
earthly	- heavenly	(couplet 3)

While couplets 1 and 3 follow the same earthly-heavenly sequence, couplet 2 is inverted, in order to make possible a double chiasm in the hymn, with couplets 1 and 2 forming a chiasmic structure “abba” and couplets 2 and 3 having the chiasmic structure “baab.” The following diagram makes clear these two chiasmic structures within the passage:

A	line 1	(earthly)
B	line 2	(heavenly)
B'	line 3	(heavenly)
A'	line 4	(earthly)
A''	line 5	(earthly)
B''	line 6	(heavenly)

Furthermore, the six lines are also related to one another in terms of either contrast or correspondence: lines 1, 4, and 5 are parallel, and are contrasted with lines 2, 3, and 6 which are likewise parallel to each other.

This earthly-heavenly contrast also helps us in resolving ambiguities within the passage. One such ambiguous expression is the second line of the hymn, “vindicated in the spirit,” (lit. “justified in the spirit”). “Spirit” here is in the dative case, marked by the preposition *en*. A double ambiguity is thus created: (1) *en* can be interpreted either in the sense of “through” (hence instrumental) or with the meaning “in the sphere of”; (2) “Spirit” can refer either to an outside vindicating force (hence the Holy Spirit), or to a quality of Christ himself, i.e., his nature as divine or as a spiritual being. A third ambiguity may be mentioned and that is, “vindicated” (literally “justified”) is used here in a legal sense with the meaning “proved to be right” (cf. GNT) rather than the usual Pauline meaning of “restored to a right relationship.”

How then do we resolve these ambiguities? The starting point is the assumption that this second line is meant to contrast with the first line, and therefore that the interpretation of the first line would influence the interpretation of the second line. Since “in the flesh” clearly means “in the realm of the flesh,” with “flesh” referring to Christ’s human nature, therefore it would be logical to take “in the spirit” to mean “in the realm of the spirit,” and to take “spirit” to refer to Christ’s divine nature.

What we have here then is a construction that is parallel to Rom 1.3-4, where both “flesh” and “spirit” also occur and seem to be used for Christ’s human and divine natures respectively. And since Christ’s divine nature is related to the resurrection in the Romans passage, the same relationship must also be present here.

It is of course possible to take “in the spirit” in an instrumental sense, with “spirit” referring to the Holy Spirit as the agent through which Christ is vindicated. The Holy Spirit in fact is present as a vindicating power in many important events of Jesus’ life, as for instance, his baptism (see Matt 3.15-17 and parallels). Taken in this manner, the line would then refer to Christ’s exaltation, and would be in contrast to the first line where the focus is on Christ’s humiliation as a result of his taking on the lowly form of a human being. However, when the relationship between the two lines includes not only a contrast in the main ideas but parallelism in grammatical features, an instrumental reading of the preposition *en* in the second line is not justified, since the first line clearly precludes such an interpretation.

Since the third couplet is parallel to the first couplet insofar as grammatical construction is concerned, the prepositional phrases there should also be interpreted in the same way. This would preclude understanding “world” as “people” and taking the preposition *en* to mean “by” (as e.g., JB “believed in by the world”). A more appropriate interpretation is to understand “in the world” to mean “in the physical or earthly sphere”; this would be a logical contrast to the last line, which refers to heavenly glory.

An objection may be raised to the above position by citing the case of the second couplet where the first line “seen by angels” is not grammatically parallel to the second line “preached among the nations.” However, it is obvious from the text that these two lines should not be treated as grammatically parallel, for while both are in the dative case, they differ grammatically, with the first line having no explicit preposition, and the second line having the preposition *en*.

It does appear that when the two parts of a couplet are meant to be interpreted as grammatically parallel, they have exactly the same grammatical features; but when the two parts are meant to be grammatically different, they are also constructed differently.

Implications for translation

Having identified and analyzed this hymnic passage, how should it be dealt with in translation?

What kind of a hymn is it? In its present context, it is a didactic hymn, since its primary function is to present Christian teaching in a clear and succinct manner. But it can also be classified as a hymn of praise and adoration, for, as we have noted, the third line and especially the last line deals with the exaltation and glorification of Christ. If such hymnic forms exist in the receptor language, the structure of these hymns should be analyzed and where possible appropriated for the 1 Timothy hymn. It is important that whatever form is utilized, the resulting translation should look like a hymn, and people

should be able to sing it once the appropriate musical notes are placed in the translation.

How many stanzas should the hymn contain? As the analyses have shown, the number of stanzas in this hymn can be six (with each line forming a stanza), or three (with each couplet forming a stanza), or two (three lines for each stanza). It is very important for translators to make up their minds regarding the structure of this hymn in order to come up with the appropriate forms in the receptor language.

Not every translator is qualified and trained to compose hymns. If there is no one in the translation team who can produce hymnic material, then the most that the team can do is produce a translation that is as accurate and clear as possible. This material is then given to a qualified person who is given the task of restructuring the translation in order to produce a suitable hymn. It is very important that the work of this qualified person be reviewed by the translation team to make sure that the meaning of the passage has not been changed in any way.

Concluding words

There are many hymns and choruses that are being used in church worship today, and while they are in general singable, many of them are full of sentimentalisms devoid of any doctrinal or biblical content. In contrast, New Testament hymns are full of theological content, as for instance, Phil 2.6-11, and of course the passage discussed in this paper. The challenge, then, is for the poets and musicians among us to take these NT hymns and put them in forms that can be used in the worship life of the church. Since these hymns contain solid biblical and theological teaching, the theological and biblical knowledge of those singing them would also be enhanced. This is one concrete way where the appropriation of translation principles in translating a specific literary genre can contribute directly to the nurturing of the worshipping community.

As an added bonus, such an endeavor can also contribute to the growth of indigenous hymnody, an endeavor which needs to be encouraged not only for today but for generations to come.

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TRANSLATING PSALM 119: Some Practical Suggestions

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Special features of Psalm 119

Psalm 119, the longest psalm of all, is a hymn of praise for God's revelation of his purposes for his people in the scriptures. The main problem in this psalm is the constant repetition of more or less synonymous terms to refer to the written word of God. Almost every verse in the psalm contains at least one such term, and a few verses contain more than one. There are a total of eight different