

## NOTES

### **Can a woman be wise? Issues in the translation of Wisdom pictured as a woman**

Some time ago, I was checking Proverbs with a translator working in a Mayan language in Guatemala. When we came to the passages where wisdom is pictured as a woman (1.20-33; 8.1-9.6), the translator objected strongly. "Women are not considered wise among our people," he said. "They are not consulted for important decisions, they are not the keepers of the traditions, they are not given positions of responsibility in the community. In fact they are seen to be foolish and often stand for foolishness in our stories, proverbs, and jokes." It turned out that though particular women could be wise, or women in certain roles (mother, aunt, grandmother, for example) could be wise, women in general could not be wise. (English speakers are familiar with a similar prejudice represented in certain sayings such as "That's an old wives' tale," or "silly girls".)

After much discussion of the matter, I gave in, letting him put "person" in place of "woman." But I insisted on a note stating that in fact the Hebrew text literally had the feminine pronoun indicating that wisdom here was to be represented as a woman, and that women in the Bible in fact were at times considered wise. I never felt good about the decision, however, and have always wanted to go back and correct it. It seems to me that the biblical texts themselves are overwhelmingly patriarchal, and worse, they often seem to support even more severe patriarchal systems in the culture of people we provide translations for. Thus any chance to soften the resulting unbalanced and arguably distorted understanding of the biblical texts should be welcomed and pursued.

Nevertheless, it was not so simple a decision, and reflecting upon it I can still see good reasons to take the course of action I did. There are several issues. The first is the indirect nature of the representation of wisdom as a woman in the first place through feminine singular grammatical forms. The only reason wisdom is indirectly represented as a woman in the original text is that the term "wisdom" in Hebrew is grammatically feminine, something that is obviously not carried through in many languages. The feminine forms in Hebrew are clear, if indirect. But many of the Mayan languages which I have worked with have problems with many types of non-literal language, especially biblical metaphors, and with personification (representing abstract terms and ideas as persons) in particular.

In one Mayan language in Mexico, the personification of evil by the serpent in Genesis 3 was only resolved by putting in a time maker placing the events in the remote past. Only then could individual animals stand at once for the group as a whole and also for some characteristic which the individual and/or group was supposed to embody. In the same language, the personification of hills and valleys which "clap their hands" in the Psalms was only made possible by a marker (literally the term "holy") which indicated that these natural objects were alive, or infused with spirit-power.

I have always maintained that the less literal the form, the more

freedom the translator has in rendering it. Take the phrase "I am not a man, but a worm," spoken by the Psalmist. This can be turned into a simile ("worthless like a worm"), reworked as another metaphor (another lowly animal, dust, dirt, garbage, trash), or converted to the literal basis of the comparison ("I don't consider myself as worthy as a normal person, but entirely worthless"). The last option lacks the poetic impact of the original metaphor, but it is at least accurate, and perhaps more clear than the original to many readers.

Often the problem of metaphor in general, and personification in particular, in languages which have difficulties with them in scripture can best be solved by conversion into a simile using the same image. Thus the first level of the translation problem as it presented itself was that the obvious but indirect personification represented in the text by the feminine pronoun would have to be converted into a very direct simile. In Mayan languages this is not done by a simple "like", but with a phrase which can be translated "as it were." Thus the expression mentioned above "worthless like a worm" would really be "worthless as it were as a worm."

But there is another long-standing problem in these texts for the Mayan languages. Abstract concepts such as "wisdom" are almost never represented as nouns, but rather are nearly always verbal constructions. Faith (at least in some contexts) in one of the Mayan languages is represented by a verbal phrase which can be translated "taking seriously what God has obligated himself to do for you." In its turn, wisdom often becomes something like "thinking and acting well (as God would have you)."

Further problems result when these abstract nouns then are used as objects or personified, such as in Proverbs 1 and 8-9. Wisdom can call, exhort, invite, warn, and otherwise act like a wise woman only because as a noun it can be treated as a thing (here a person), while an equivalent verbal phrase looks ridiculous trying to do the same. In such cases the Mayan solution is to simply use either the verbal phrase or else an unnatural (often borrowed or coined) abstract noun. But this is always done with the addition of the same simile-creating "as it were" phrase; and this shows that the author or speaker really knows that the noun or the verbal phrase about to act in some way like something or someone in the real world does not actually possess such a capacity.

The result of the above Mayan transformations on the text of Proverbs was "Thinking and acting well as it were calls out as it were as a woman would call" (1.20; 8.1). Both wisdom as an actor and the comparison of wisdom to a woman had to be carefully converted to similes so as not to be taken literally. After some discussion it was decided that perhaps only one "as it were" could in fact cover both issues. But it was at this point that the translator stumbled. By making clear both the meaning of wisdom and uncovering the comparison between wisdom and an apparent woman in the text (standing at once for all women and for thinking and acting well!), the passage became for him impossible to present in his cultural context. It would simply not have been believable.

Most Bible translators would agree that if a significant enough theological understanding is at stake, translators should not be afraid of challenging cultural perspectives. Rules of acceptability imposed by

languages are usually limited to such things as avoiding what is socially inappropriate or vulgar in translation. Of course this is precisely what the Mayan cultures would think about the issue of whether a woman can be wise! As translators, we are constantly making decisions as to what is theologically significant (that is, it must be represented even if it offends the audience) and what can be ignored as cultural dressing in the original message and/or culturally protected in the language of the translation (that is, it can be treated as part of the vehicle of the message rather than its content).

A general problem raised by this example is that when information like this is put into words (as when feminine grammatical markers in Hebrew become "woman" in this text), the original text is actually over-represented. This is contrary to what we often understand to happen in such cases, as many believe that putting into words information that is not expressed directly in the original reduces the ambiguity of the communication and thus under-represents it. While this may be true in the senses mentioned, by representing Wisdom as a woman here, translators bring into focus the gender issue in a way it simply never existed before, and thus introduce a problem they are then forced to solve. In this way they over-represent the text.

In this case we must admit that the text does not present the issue as theological. It does not really present the issue at all as such, but only indirectly. Furthermore, the biblical text has passages which are far more difficult than this one when it comes to women's issues. The Bible does not speak with one voice on the matter of how women are to be regarded, so it is tempting to ignore the problem or even defend a patriarchal translation by referring to the overwhelmingly patriarchal texts of scripture, particularly in the OT.

Yet these are core cultural values (both original and Mayan) being exposed by the translation, and thus are the responsibility of the translator. We must decide whether our overall biblical theology will allow such understanding of the texts or not. In other words, biblically speaking, can a woman be wise (or be strong, or have prestige, and so on), whether or not she was considered as such culturally in ancient Israel or in the time of the New Testament? Our answer to this question is critical, not only for resolving this case but for many like it in the Bible.

Attempts to remove indirect cultural bias from scripture can be tricky. There have been well-meaning changes to texts which refer to men being bald, for example, which end up sounding like they refer to women being bald also ("if a person is bald"). While women can go bald, the text surely was referring to male pattern baldness. Metaphors can be ruined, such as in the case where "a lion lies down at evening, in the morning he" is changed to "lions lie down at evening, in the morning they". The personification here depends on the individual representing the class. The plural loses both this altogether, and sounds like a reference to a particular group of lions. And finally, "the priest ... he" has been changed at times to "priests ... they" in contexts where there is only the high priest involved in the ceremony, resulting in the picture of many priests in place of one.

So what should we do in this case? Should we insist on putting the woman in the text and adding a note which defends our actions on

the basis of the biblical text? That is the course I favor at present, but it seems heavy-handed when I compare it to other cases of metaphor and personification and the freedom we allow there. Principles in Bible translation are often not consistent with one another, and the art of translating is often the careful weighing and clever weaving together of competing principles into a meaningful and accurate text. If we add another principle, or move it higher in the list of principles we already have, that will make our job more difficult.

Issues related to gender have not usually been very high up on the list of principles translators need to consider, if they are on the list at all. Being sensitive to the language and culture of the people we are translating for has been far more prominent. When non-literal original language is involved, many translators and consultants feel free to give the language and culture in which the translation will be read even more room than would otherwise be possible. However, we really need to recognize gender issues as more than non-central social matters, and see them as part of the social core or theological message of the Bible. And in the light of this, we need to give them their proper place in the set of principles translators feel they have to consider. This will not make translation any easier. Hopefully, it will make it better.

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### **Making the most of resources for translation projects**

*These notes come out of reflection on the Lamba and Lenje Bible translation projects in Zambia. The Lamba project was active during the 1970s, while the Lenje project began in 1990.*

As I look at the differences between these two projects, it is obvious to me that the use of computers has revolutionised Bible translation. Added to that there has been great development in computers and software even over the period that the Lenje project has been in progress.

Effectively the translation of the Lenje Bible has been done in seven and a half years. But as I think about the adjustments that have been made to procedures during this project, and the new technology that is now available, I have come to the conclusion that the time taken in translating a Bible could still be reduced by as much as two years. (I am referring to the translation time, of course; no allowance has been made for the typesetting, proofreading, and printing – these procedures are out of the hands of the translation team.)

Three factors would be important for saving time in the translation process:

- More thorough training of the translation team at the start.
- Making the best use of computer resources.
- Streamlining work procedures.