

NOTE

THE TRANSLATOR'S THEOLOGY

A response to "Taking Theology Seriously in the Translation Task"

Under the title **Unjustified theologizing**, Dr Arichea notes a well-known abuse: the temptation to "adapt" the biblical text to fit in with the translator's theology (TBTT 33, July 1982, page 309).

Those who know the Bible de Jérusalem (BJ) will be surprised to find it among the prisoners in the dock, for translating Mt. 1.24f. as "[Joseph] prit chez lui son épouse; et, sans qu'il l'eût connue, elle enfanta un fils auquel il donna le nom de Jésus" ("[Joseph] took his wife home; and without his having known her, she gave birth to a son to whom he gave the name of Jesus.") The 1977 edition of BJ offers a more strictly formal correspondence: "He did not know her until the day when she gave birth to a son."

For my part, I think that in this case, the problem is more delicate than Dr Arichea thinks. He claims that the *heōs* means literally "until". No doubt. But must one always translate "literally"? The question is worth asking, *especially in Matthew* where it is often necessary to take account of the *underlying semitic background*.

In fact, Hebrew and biblical Greek sometimes use "until" in cases where the word is not to be taken in its literal sense. Let us take two examples.

In Ps. 110.1, quoted in Mt. 22.44 and parallels, the French common language Bible, like the German, translates:

Viens siéger à ma droite;
je veux contraindre tes ennemis
à te servir de marchepied."

("Come and sit on my right; I want to force your enemies to be used as your footstool"). All the old translations have accustomed us to "until I make your enemies your footstool". Incidentally, that is how the French common language Bible translates Mt. 22.44, unnecessarily departing from the text of the psalm; the German common language Bible is more consistent. But the new French and German translations of the psalm clearly convey the psalmist's meaning, that the Messiah will continue to sit at the Lord's right hand after his enemies have been defeated.

This shows that *heōs* in the Bible does not always mean "until". The French and German translators of the psalm are right: the translation "until I make your enemies your footstool" is not faithful but servile.

In Isaiah 42.4, quoted in Mt. 12.20, the Good News Bible translates:

He will not lose hope or courage;
he will establish justice on the earth.

Mt. 12.20 quotes Isa. 42.1-4 rather freely. The French common language version reads:

Il ne cassera pas le roseau courbé,
il n'éteindra pas la lampe dont la lumière faiblit.
Il agira ainsi jusqu' à ce qu'il ait fait triompher
la justice.

(“He will persist until he causes justice to triumph”—GNB). Here, too, the word “until” by no means implies that the Servant’s attitude will change after this victory. One might equally well translate: “That is how he will make justice triumph.”

Apart from the texts which presuppose a Semitic background, others may be quoted in which *heōs* does not include an assumption about *what will happen afterwards*. For example, 1 Tim. 4.13:

GNB: “Until I come, give your time and effort to the public reading of the scriptures.”

German common language Bible: “Bis ich komme . . .”

TOB: “En attendant ma venue . . .”

French common language Bible: “En attendant que je vienne . . .”

What about Mt. 1.25? The context sees the virgin birth of Jesus foretold in Isa. 7.14. Matthew’s intention is to underline that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born (see TOB note). There are several possible translations:

“Joseph had no relations with Mary until she had brought her son into the world.”

“Joseph had no further relations with Mary until after she had brought her son into the world.”

“Mary brought her son into the world without Joseph having had relations with her.”

(“Relations” of course implies “sexual relations”, and in some languages it may be necessary to specify this. “Brought her son into the world” may be more simply translated “gave birth to her son”).

In reality, as Dr Arichea recognizes later in his article, the translator will often be guided by his faith, or by his interpretation of the immediate or the wider context. How could it be otherwise, in cases where the text lends itself to theological divergent interpretations?

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