

**Two instances of chiasmus rephrased,
from *Baebol long Bislama* of Vanuatu, South Pacific**

Over the last hundred years, chiasmus has not been a prominent feature of English writing, and the definitions given in English dictionaries frequently do not describe the form that chiasmus takes in Hebrew. A typical English definition is found in *the Macquarie Dictionary*: “the reversal of the order in which two grammatical elements occur in a pair of parallel phrases.” The example which follows shows that this and many other English definitions take chiasmus to be of the form A–B, B’–A’. However the Hebrew chiastic structure is normally of the form A, B–B’, A’, and many English readers do not grasp the point involved until a person with knowledge of Hebrew points out the significance.

In Vanuatu speakers of some of the one hundred and five traditional languages recognise some form of chiasmus in their mother tongue; but speakers of other languages do not recognise any such arrangement. In the lingua franca Bislama such transpositions do not exist, and so rephrasing of chiasmus is commonly necessary to make clear the meaning of the Bible. I will give two examples here from *Baebol long Bislama*, one from Genesis and one from Isaiah.

The text of Genesis 28.1-3 in RSV is as follows:

“Then Isaac called Jacob

[A] and blessed him,

[B] and charged him,

[B’] ‘You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. ² Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father, and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.

[A’] ³ God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, so that you may become a company of peoples.’ ”

In Bislama the clearest form of chiastic rearrangement is the form B-B’, A-A’, so that the back translation is:

“So Isaac called Jacob to him

[B] and said to him,

[B’] ‘You shall not marry a girl from Canaan. You must go back to Mesopotamia, to the house of your grandfather Bethuel. Laban your mother’s brother lives there. It would be good for you to marry one of his daughters.’

[A] And then he blessed him saying,

[A] 'And my prayer is that God who has complete power will bless you, and give you plenty of children, so that you will become the ancestor of the people from plenty of places.' "

For the example taken from Isa 56.3-7, the significant feature in making the change was the resulting increase in clarity of the rearrangement to good Bislama speakers. The RSV text is as follows:

[A] ³ Let not the foreigner who has joined himself unto the LORD say, 'The LORD will certainly separate us from his people';

[B] and let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.'

⁴ For thus says the LORD:

[B] 'To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, ⁵ I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.

[A] ⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenants, ⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.' "

A back translation of this in *Baebol long Bislama* is as follows:

"It is not true for a man who has been castrated to be saying that because he cannot bear children, he cannot go and become one with the people of the Lord.

The Lord says, 'You who have been castrated, if you hold all the laws surrounding my sabbath days, and you honour me completely and you continually hold my promises, it won't matter that you don't have children. I will bring it about that in my house and in the presence of my people, your names will live longer than they would if you had had children. My people will never ever forget you.'

And the people from other countries are saying, 'The Lord won't let us go to worship with his people.'

But he is saying, 'You people of other countries who want to join (in worship) with my people, if you love me, and you worship me, and

you do what I want, and you hold all the laws concerning the sabbath day, doing all the things that have to be done on that day, and you continually hold all my other promises, I will bring you to Zion, my holy hill. I will make you rejoice in my house, and if you make sacrifices on my altar, I will receive your sacrifices, because people will be saying that my house will be a house of prayer for the people of all countries.' ”

BILL CAMDEN

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When a word makes all the difference – Deuteronomy 6.4-9

I have been familiar with this passage for a long time. Through my interest in Christian education and ministry to children, I have often used it in Bible study and preaching. So I do not see this passage only from the perspective of translation, but also as a Bible teacher and preacher.

There are of course problems involved with the translation of several words, and especially with the meaning of *'ehad* “one” or “only” in verse 4. But my point of interest is the last word of this unit, *ubish'areka* “and on your gates”. As the dictionaries show, this word is never used in the Hebrew Bible for the door of a house.

All the Spanish versions available to me, with two exceptions, translate the Hebrew word as *puertas* “doors”. Some (VP and LPD) even go on to say *puertas de tu casa* “doors of your house”. In English RSV and GNB both have “gates”. The Portuguese version *A Bíblia na linguagem de hoje* also has *portões* “gates”. But in Spanish only *La Nueva Biblia Española* (NBE) and *La Biblia Latinoamericana* (BLA) translate the true meaning of the Hebrew text. I like very much what BLA has: *a la entrada de tus ciudades* “at the gates of your cities”.

Here we have a problem of faithfulness to the original meaning. Our commonly used versions (VP and RVR) tell the Spanish reader that the command is to write “these words” (the ones in verses 4-6) on the doorposts and doors of the Israelite houses. But we know that this is not true. So here we also have a problem of interpretation and theology.

When teaching or preaching from this text, if the Bible student has one of these two versions, RVR or VP, the conclusion is that the responsibility of parents for teaching their children extends only as far as the doors of their homes. And when I have asked the question, “According to this text, how far does the responsibility of parents for teaching their children go?” the answer has always been “the boundaries of the family home”. But that is not the intention of the writer – of the Word of God. The responsibility of parents is extended to the limits of their town or city. In our modern context I would say this means “as far as your child moves in his/her daily life”.