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IN SEARCH OF WISDOM: NOTES ON JOB 28

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The book of Job is one of the more difficult books of the Old Testament. Within this book chapter 28 is a poem about Wisdom which does not have a very close connection with its context and is not really a part of the argument between Job and his three friends. For this reason, it can be adapted as a New Reader selection, and it has been chosen for this use in the Asia-Pacific Region of the UBS. The following notes are based on the work involved in preparing a draft of this passage as a New Reader selection.

The Structure of the Passage

Job 28 is a poem, and so we should look at it as a whole before we try to tackle the individual verses. Some scholars think that the Hebrew text as we now have it is not always in the right order, and so they have made various suggestions for changing it. However, before accepting such suggestions, the translator should see whether the passage as it stands shows signs of internal structure. It is surprising how often commentaries do not give this kind of information. In the case of Job 28, a reasonable structure can be seen if we make paragraph breaks at the beginning of verse 12, verse 20 and verse 28. Paragraph breaks in these three places can be found in various modern versions, though I have not found one with breaks at these and only these places.

The second half of the chapter (verses 12 to 28) is simpler to analyse than the first half, and so we will deal with it first. Verses 12 and 20 both ask where Wisdom can be found, and they use almost identical wording. This suggests that the verses following them may be in some way parallel with each other. On closer inspection we find that this is the case. Verses 13-14 and 21-22 both attempt to answer the question where Wisdom can be found. At least, they give a partial answer and state where Wisdom cannot be found! Verses 15-19 compare the value of Wisdom with that of gold and other precious objects. Verses 23-27 state that only God really knows the location and the true value of Wisdom.

Thus we can set out the structure of the second half of the poem as follows:

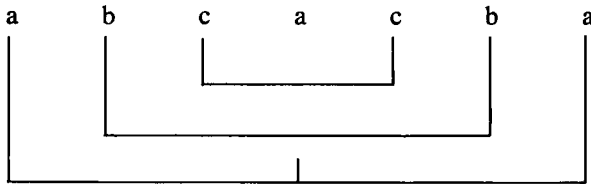
- a. Where Wisdom cannot be found (verses 12-14)
- b. Wisdom is of greater value than gold and jewels (verses 15-19)

- a. Where Wisdom cannot be found (verses 20-22)
- c. Only God knows the real value of Wisdom (verses 23-27)

When we turn to the first part of the chapter, we see that it does not contain any repetition of almost identical words, as the second half does in verses 12 and 20. However, it does repeat ideas and themes, and we can list these repetitions as follows:

- a. Getting precious stones out of the earth (verses 1-2)
- b. Searching underground (verse 3)
- c. The remoteness of the mines (verse 4)
- a. Getting precious stones out of the earth (verses 5-6)
- c. The remoteness of the mines (verses 7-8)
- b. Searching underground (verse 9)
- a. Getting precious stones out of the earth (verses 10-11)

If we rearrange the repetitions horizontally we can easily see that they form a concentric pattern:



When we recognize the pattern, we can see why scholars have sometimes suggested that the verses should be put in a different order so as to bring together those which deal with the same idea. We can also see that the order used by the Hebrew poet is more artistic than any alteration of it would be!

So then, we can see that there are patterns in both halves of the poem, though they are not the same in each half. The last verse, verse 28, is not part of either pattern, and stands on its own as the climax of the whole poem.

If a translator recognizes the structure of a passage, it can help in several ways. First of all, it reveals how a passage hangs together as a unity, and shows what its main divisions and ideas are. When a translator has grasped these, he will be in a better position to decide whether his translation as a whole gives an accurate picture of the intention of the original poet.

Secondly, in cases where a passage is being considered for use as a selection, it will help to show what should be included, and what may be left out. In Job 28, it would not be possible to omit any part of it without breaking the patterns. This would at the very least hide something of the poet's skill, and could also change his emphasis, or even distort his meaning.

Thirdly, an understanding of the structure of a passage can help a translator to make decisions about the best way to handle individual verses. Sometimes it can even help him to decide between different possible meanings within a verse. We will now look at some of the individual verses in the light of the overall pattern.

Individual verses

Verses 1 & 2 go together. In the first half of each verse, the poet speaks of digging a metal from the earth, and in the second half of each verse, he speaks of refining or purifying the ores. Thus the two verses as a whole have an *a b a b* pattern in their repetition of ideas. In translation, especially a translation for New Readers, it may be helpful to put the two “a” ideas together at the beginning, and the two “b” ideas at the end. The flow of thought is simpler to follow if there is no switching backwards and forwards from one idea to the other. A possible translation is:

There are mines where men dig
to get silver and iron from the ground.
There are places where they melt copper and gold
to purify them.

* * *

Verses 10 and 11 also go together. As we saw earlier these verses balance verses 1 and 2 in the structure of the first half of the poem. It therefore comes as no surprise to see that these two verses also present their ideas in an *a b a b* pattern. The first half of each verse speaks of a part of the digging process, and the second part of each verse speaks of finding precious objects. Again it may be helpful in translation to bring the two “a” ideas together at the beginning, and the two “b” ideas at the end. Moffatt has done so in his translation.

In this case there is a further problem in deciding the exact meaning of the “a” part of verse 11. The Good News Bible has “they dig to the sources of rivers”, with a footnote indicating that this is the meaning given by the Septuagint and other ancient translations. JB and NIV translate similarly. RSV follows the traditional Hebrew text and translates as “He binds up the streams so that they do not trickle” (compare Moffatt and the French Traduction Ecuménique). Every translator has to decide which meaning to follow, and in this case, we should take into account the pattern of ideas in verses 10 and 11 as a whole. The “a” ideas both speak about tunnelling in the mines, and in this context, finding an underground stream would be a nuisance or even a danger to the miners. Therefore it seems likely that the poet would speak about blocking off such streams rather than simply about finding them. So in this case the interpretation of the RSV seems a little more convincing than that of the GNB. Here then, the pattern of ideas supports following the Hebrew text, and an interpretation which makes sense of the Hebrew usually has an advantage over one which depends on an ancient version. A possible translation of the two verses is:

As they make tunnels through the rocks
they block off underground streams.
They discover precious stones
and bring them out into the daylight.

* * *

We may also consider verses 7 and 8, which read in the literal translation of the RSV:

That path no bird of prey knows,
 and the falcon's eye has not seen it.
 The proud beasts have not trodden it;
 the lion has not passed over it.

The translator needs to answer two questions before translating these verses. The first is how many types of creatures are mentioned, and the second is what does "That path" refer to.

In considering the first question, we notice the difference between RSV and GNB concerning the creatures mentioned

RSV (compare JB, NIV)	GNB (compare Moffatt)
bird of prey	hawk
falcon	vulture
proud beasts	lion
lion	other fierce beast

RSV, JB and NIV each have two general terms ("bird of prey" and "proud beasts" in RSV) and two specific terms ("falcon" and "lion" in RSV). GNB and Moffatt have three specific terms and only one general term. (We need not worry about the exact names chosen for the different birds.) When we look at the structure of the two verses, it is clear that they are parallel with each other. It is also clear that within each verse, the poet is saying more or less the same thing twice. The second half of each verse repeats the thought of the first, but with more detail. It is rather surprising that several English versions have recognized this repetition in verse 8, but have apparently failed to recognize it in verse 7. In view of the parallelism of expression, it seems probable that each verse contains one generic and one specific term. In other words, the RSV translation is more in keeping with the poetic structure of the verses in Hebrew.

However this does not mean that a good English translation will have to stick closely to the Hebrew structure. In fact, a translation like RSV will be misleading if it gives the impression that four separate statements are being made. As we have seen, there are really only two statements but each is made twice, once in general terms and once in specific terms. An English translation will be clearer (especially to New Readers) if it runs the two halves of each verse together, and simply makes one statement in verse 7 about falcons, and one in verse 8 about lions. Later we will suggest an English translation that may be suitable for New Readers, but before doing so, we must discuss the question of what "That path" in verse 7 refers to.

No path has been mentioned in the earlier verses, so there is no absolutely certain answer to this question. GNB assumes the meaning to be "the roads to the mines" (compare NEB), and this seems at first sight to be a reasonable interpretation. An alternative interpretation is found in the Jerusalem Bible, which has "Down there is a path unknown to birds of prey . . ." "Down there" refers to the tunnels in the mines themselves. Two things can be said in favour of this interpretation. One is that it makes clearer sense. There is no reason why birds in flight should not see paths which lead to the mines, but there is every reason why birds would not see paths inside the mines.

The second point in favour of this interpretation is that it fits better with the overall structure of verses 1-11. According to the outline of this section suggested above, verses 7-8 are parallel with verse 4, both speaking about the

remoteness of the mines. Verse 4 says that the mine shafts are well away from where people normally live or travel, and verses 7-8 make the same point more forcefully by saying that the mine shafts are out of the way of even birds and beasts. This point is blunted if the "path" refers to the road to the mines rather than the tunnel inside the mine itself. The total structure of verses 1-11 then, tends to support the interpretation of verse 7 found in the Jerusalem Bible.

For verses 7-8 we may suggest the following as a translation suitable for New Readers:

Even hawks do not see the tunnels in the mines,
and even lions do not pass along them.

Conclusion

We have tried to show how an examination of the structure of a poetic passage can help translators. It may give them a better understanding of the outline and general flow of thought in the passage. It may help them see how verses which express similar ideas are related to each other even when they are separated by verses which express other ideas. It may help them in making decisions about the precise interpretation of particular verses or parts of verses. And last but not least, it may give the translator a greater realization of the artistic skill of the Biblical writers, and a greater enjoyment of the Word of God. I am sure that my own appreciation of both the form and the meaning of Job 28 has been much increased as a result of the work on which these notes are based.

CAHIERS DE TRADUCTION BIBLIQUE

Sous le titre de *Cahiers de traduction biblique*, des représentants de la SIL (Société internationale de linguistique) et de L'ABU se proposent de publier une revue de langue française correspondant à TBT. Des articles parus dans TBT ou dans NOT (Notes on Translation) seront traduits en français et d'autres seront directement rédigés dans cette langue. On prévoit une parution de deux cahiers par année, avec 32 pages pour chacun. Cette revue sera spécialement destinée aux traducteurs de la Bible des pays francophones, mais elle devrait aussi intéresser des biblistes non directement engagés dans le travail de traduction. Un prospectus de lancement paraîtra à la fin de 1982. Les personnes qui désireraient en recevoir peuvent s'adresser à la rédaction de TBT.