

Attacked from all sides, Jerusalem
is like a shack in a melon patch.

(4) Revelation 1.4-5

Grace and peace to you
from God who is and was
and who is to come,
from the seven spirits
in front of God's throne,
from Jesus Christ,
the faithful witness,
the first to be raised from death,
and the ruler of all kings on earth.

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STRUGGLING WITH THE PROPHETS IN TRANSLATION

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The prophets gave the people of Israel and Judah many uncomfortable moments. They still give us problems as we try to translate their writings today. In this brief article we shall review some of the more frequent problems and try to find solutions, or at least some guidelines leading to solutions. Most of the problems the translator finds in any one of the books of the prophets must be handled individually, and the solutions must be found with the help of the UBS Guides or Handbooks, or a good commentary on that book.

Prophets and their task

In the Bible prophets seem to appear on the scene with little or no explanation as to who they were or how they fitted into the religious system of the times. However, it appears that some were officially recognized, whether by the Temple officials, by the king, or by both. Others seem to have been upstarts, coming on the scene uninvited and usually unwelcome.

As to the message they preached, it is clear that somehow the message of a true prophet was considered a message or oracle of Yahweh, the Lord. This idea is expressed in the words frequently repeated by the prophets, "Utterance of Yahweh" or "Thus says Yahweh." When the prophet spoke a true message of Yahweh, it was as if God himself were speaking to the people.

It is not clear in every instance how the message of Yahweh came to the prophet. Sometimes it came in a dream or vision, but often the statement is made that "the word of Yahweh came to" a certain prophet, with no information as to how this communication took place.

More important is the effect that the prophetic word had. In Ezekiel 37 the spoken word of the prophet had the power to put living flesh on dry bones, and to call forth God's Spirit to breathe life back into those bodies. The prophetic word was not mere "talk" but was an effective instrument, even a weapon. Therefore a prophet speaking against government policy was not ignored as merely speaking useless words but was considered guilty of treason (Jer 26; Am 7.10-13).

Different types of discourse

When translating the writings of the prophets, the translator never knows in advance what sort of literary genre ("type of discourse") the prophet will use. For example, a long section of narrative prose discourse occurs in Isaiah 36—39. This is in contrast with much of the rest of the Book of Isaiah, which is generally recognized as poetic, as in Isaiah 42.1-9. Sections of ordinary prose discourse may occur as well, as in Joel 3.1-8. The translator needs to be alert to these changes in genre in order to reproduce something with the intended effect in his own language.

The Book of Jeremiah presents its own kind of problem with respect to genre. Scholars have long recognized that there are at least three types of material in the book: (a) poetic material that seems to have been a spoken oracle of Jeremiah (chapter 2, for example); (b) narrative prose material that does not claim to have been written by Jeremiah, but may have been written by someone else about the prophet, someone such as Baruch ben-Neriah, Jeremiah's secretary (Jer 36.4; see chapter 26 as an example); (c) prose material in a somewhat oratorical style, reminiscent of the style of the speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy (for example, Jer 7.1-20). Furthermore, the material has not all been arranged in chronological order. Scholars continue to debate over the precise division of these three kinds of material in Jeremiah.

Usually there is no problem translating prose material, and it hardly seems likely that a language exists where people do not narrate stories using the medium of prose discourse. Poetry, however, presents a special problem. In a good many languages the translators have decided to translate the poetic message of the prophets as prose, since in their

cultures no one would dream of speaking a warning from God in a poetic form, for then no one would take the message seriously! Poetry is reserved in some languages for romantic serenades, for proverbs and riddles, or for pure entertainment. Isaiah 5.1-2 is presented in the Hebrew as if it were the beginning of a love poem, using the imagery of a vineyard. But the message is one of disappointment, even anger, in the verses that follow. How will the language of the translation do justice to this kind of device? Hosea 4.1-10 uses the language of a courtroom, with accusations, threats, and judgment, and at the same time we sense that the speaker's heart is breaking because of the unfaithfulness of the accused. Is poetry the proper type of discourse to convey this?

In addition, many translators have had to admit that they do not have the poetic talent to do a proper job of reproducing good poetry in a book as important as the Bible. However, if a poetic form is possible and appropriate, and if people with the proper talent can be found to reproduce it, then the poetic form should be considered for use.

But that is not the end of the problems with poetry. It seems that the Hebrew Bible does not make a clear distinction between what is poetry and what is not. For example, we find the most ordinary prose that can sound almost dull, such as sections of law codes in Leviticus. But in the middle of a prose section, the writer will introduce a poetic feature or two, such as a pair of parallel lines, or a figure of speech introduced in an artistic manner. Sometimes a pair of lines using the device known as "chiasmus" will suddenly appear, where the second line follows the pattern of the first line, but in reverse order. Such features may be introduced to a greater or lesser frequency, and we are faced with the question, "At what point must we say that this is no longer prose, but now must be considered poetry?"

On the other hand, some material normally considered poetry must be questioned as to whether it is not really prose. Psalm 23, though not written as prophetic literature, demonstrates the problem. There is only one pair of clearly parallel lines in the entire psalm, and the rest can be understood as prose which is elevated to a higher, more beautiful level by the use of figures of speech. What this all means is that there is no clear line of distinction, no clear boundary line, between prose and poetry in Hebrew literature. Note, for example, how RSV and GNB differ in assigning sections of Hosea 2.14-23 to the genres of poetry and prose. The difference is due to the lack of a clear distinction between the two genres.

Perhaps this will, in fact, make the decision easier for the translator. Since there is no clear boundary between prose and poetry in Hebrew, the translator can exercise greater freedom to do what is most appropriate in his own language. Most languages will have no problem with what we call "elevated prose". Such prose makes use of devices for

making the discourse more interesting, more beautiful, more “poetic”, without crossing over the boundary into the poetic genre. For many languages elevated prose may be the option for the translator to select.

Boundaries between sections

We usually take it for granted that the words of the prophet were not only written down but were spoken at one time or another. It is possible that some material was only written, never spoken, but that does not seem to be the normal way in which the prophetic word was brought to the people.

The entire Book of Isaiah, for example, could hardly have been spoken on one occasion, but separate sections must have been spoken at different times and for different purposes. The Book of Joel is a much shorter book, and it seems to have an overall structure in which the individual sections fit together to make for a unified whole. But even there we can see where the various parts must have been spoken on different occasions. For example, Joel 1 gives the impression of having been spoken out in the rural areas, while Joel 2.1-11 gives the impression of having been spoken inside the city of Jerusalem. In addition there is the problem of the various types of material found in Jeremiah, since different types of discourse may appear in one section, and we may want to reflect those types within a section, while also observing the boundaries between sections.

The Book of Isaiah provides some interesting examples of the way in which sections of prophetic speech were brought together. In many places this seems to have been done by joining sections that had the same theme or key word. Isaiah 1.2-8 ends with the statement “. . . *left* like a booth in a vineyard . . .” and is followed by verse 9, “. . . *left* us a few survivors”, which in turn ends with the mention of “Sodom and Gomorrah”. Verse 10 then picks up the theme of “Sodom and Gomorrah”. Were these separate, brief prophetic oracles at first, which later were joined in writing? Or did the prophet use these devices in moving from one theme to another as he spoke the entire oracle? A sharper contrast occurs at the division between chapters 8 and 9. Isaiah 8 ends with a threat to God’s people, who will experience “darkness”, “gloom”, and “anguish”. Isaiah 9.2 begins a beautiful promise of God’s mercy, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light . . .” How can these contrasting oracles be brought together? Verse 1 accomplishes this transition in the words “But there will be no gloom for her that was in anguish . . .” It seems unlikely that chapters 8 and 9 would have been spoken at the same time, but in recording the two together, verse 1 served as a good bridge between them.

It is not the translator’s problem to decide whether the prophet himself arranged his material in a certain order and wrote the necessary “bridge” material, or whether this was done by someone else. What is

important for the translator is to recognize where sections break off from each other. Not only are section headings involved, but the way the text moves from one section of discourse to another should be reflected faithfully according to the normal way in which this is done in the language of the translation. This may involve such a small thing as the positioning of quotation marks, or something clearer such as transitional expressions that reflect a break in the discourse. Paragraphs must be constructed to reflect the grouping of certain sentences as well as their distinction from the preceding or the following context. Key ideas must be reflected consistently, especially as they mark the boundaries or the content of the discourse.

Who is speaking about whom?

One of the more awkward problems in translating the prophets is demonstrated in Joel 2.15—3.8. Verses 15-17 do not state who is speaking about the need for Jerusalem to repent; we can assume it is the prophet. Verses 18-20 narrate a message spoken by the Lord, and RSV indicates this with quotation marks at verse 19, second line. The quotation, according to RSV, continues through 3.8. However, mixed into this quotation are various references to the Lord in the third person, as if the Lord were speaking of himself as someone else: verse 21, “for the LORD has done great things!”, verse 23, “for he has given the early rain . . . he has poured down for you . . .” Verse 25 suddenly has the Lord speaking directly again, “I will restore to you” and “my great army, which I sent among you”. But verse 26 switches back again, “You shall . . . praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.” In the next breath verse 26 continues with “And my people shall never again be put to shame,” and this first-person reference continues through verse 29. A new paragraph (prose) begins in verse 30, continuing the use of the first-person reference to himself, “And I will give . . .”, but this seems to melt away into a third-person reference at the end of verse 31, “before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes”, and third-person reference continues through verse 32. In chapter 3, verses 1-8 are consistently in the first person.

Most commentators think of 2.30—3.8 as a separate oracle from the preceding verses. Yet it is interesting to see how both sections contain sudden shifts from the speaker speaking *as* the Lord to speaking *about* the Lord, and in discourse that cannot simply be dismissed as coming from the hand of an editor, or as the result of joining together two oracles that were originally separate, one in the first person and the other in the third person. In other words, we are forced to recognize here that this is one of the ways in which the prophets wrote, and most likely the way they spoke as well.

How can we make sense of all of this? There is hardly a culture anywhere today where people will carelessly switch back and forth that

way between using first- and third-person references to themselves. Various solutions may be possible, but we offer at least one at this time:

It may be helpful to remember that "the Word of the Lord" came to the prophets in a way that is not described for us. When this Word came to them, it appears that they spoke as if it were the Lord speaking, using the first-person reference. However, if the written record is considered a reliable mirror of the spoken word, it also appears that they would lapse into speaking *on behalf of* and *about* the Lord in one moment, and then return to speaking *as* the Lord in the next moment. This is not the only possible explanation, but it does show one way in which this awkward translation problem may have developed.

The question remains: what are we to do about it in translation? Today's serious reader will be puzzled by the form of the discourse in RSV, especially if there is no note or comment to help him understand what is taking place. It seems best to be consistent in the use of either first-person or third-person references within a given section of discourse. In some cases the decision can be made on the basis of the more prominent occurrence of either form. In other cases the use of introductory phrases such as "Thus says the LORD" will call for a first-person discourse. Translators should be careful not to make the awkward error found in Joel 2.28-32 of GNB, where the Lord's speech is clearly indicated by quotation marks, but where he appears to quote himself within the quotation at the end of verse 32!

Frequently the use of the divine name, *YAHWEH*, will appear to demand a third-person reference when it is translated in clauses such as "the LORD has done this" in RSV. But this is often God's way of referring to his own name, and the translation may be something like "I, Yahweh, have done this" or "I, the LORD, have done this."

In all cases it is necessary to seek a form that will give the reader the clear understanding that the prophet is speaking on behalf of the Lord, either speaking *as* the Lord or *about* the Lord, but hardly mixing the two.

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Many other challenges will face the translator who tackles the prophets, but most of them will have to be handled on an individual basis, as they occur. We therefore recommend again the careful study of available Handbooks and commentaries, as well as general reading about the prophets and their messages. (For general information on the prophets, see for example the entries "Prophet, Prophetism" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, and "Prophecy in ancient Israel" in the supplementary volume of this Dictionary.)