

“You see this. If it is so, we can do nothing. Because look, everybody is going with him!”

We can see that the order of verses within this portion has now become 12a, 14a, 17, 18, 12b, 13, 14b, 15, 16, 19.

After careful study of the passage and then discussion of the draft with the translator (a work sequence we follow throughout the New Testament), I agreed that this was a far clearer and more satisfactory ordering of the events. The only minor adjustments we made were changes in single words, and these have been included in the transcription above. The translator added that he had found the passage difficult to follow in the existing Mataco translation, a fairly literal work published in 1962 which, in this passage and in every other matter, maintains the strict verse-by-verse order of traditional versions.

Further encouragement for us came with the visit of the United Bible Societies' Translation Consultant for the region, with whom we took the opportunity to discuss the passage. He was satisfied with the rearrangement of the verses, agreeing too with our numeration, and suggesting certain adjustments to clarify overall interrelation of the discourse structure.

May all translators show more and more understanding, imagination and initiative of this kind!

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What did Isaac go out to do? (Genesis 24.63-65)

In the context of the story of Isaac and Rebecca there are several fascinating translation problems. One of the more interesting and difficult ones is found in Genesis 24.63-65 where we read in the Good News Bible:

He went out in the early evening to take a walk in the fields and saw camels coming. When Rebecca saw Isaac, she got down from her camel and asked Abraham's servant, “Who is that man walking toward us in the field?”

At first glance the reader might have the impression that the words “walk in the fields” in verse 63 and “walking . . . in the field” in verse 65 come from similar expressions in the Hebrew. This, however, is far

from the case. While the words for "in the field" are identical, the verbs are quite different. This is revealed by the wide variety of translations of this verb that may be found in other versions. RSV, NIV and a few other versions translate the verb in verse 63 "to meditate". James Moffatt's translation indicates that Isaac went out "to mourn". NEB renders this same verb "hoping to meet them". And the translators of NAB find it so difficult that they give up and leave a blank space where the verb should be: "he went out . . . in the field".

What, then, did Isaac go out to do?

The verb in question is found only here in all of the Old Testament. It is sometimes said that the form *suah*, used here, is related to the similar verb *siah* which can mean "meditate" and this is apparently how it was understood by the translators of the ancient Greek version (LXX). This understanding of the text yields the translation of RSV, NIV, NASB and MLB ("went out for his twilight meditations").

Others take it as a variant of the verb *shuth*, meaning "to roam around; rove about". The result of this approach to the problem is a translation that gives the idea that Isaac went out for his evening stroll, as in GNB, NJB, and NJV.

The problem is that this verb is not used anywhere else in all the Bible. And, in fact, no one really knows what it means. This is the reason behind the blank space in NAB.

While NEB translates the questionable Hebrew word "hoping to meet them", it has a footnote indicating that the verb used here may be a euphemism for "to relieve himself". This is also the position taken by the Maredsous version in French. The text of this version has the equally euphemistic expression "to isolate himself". But there is a footnote indicating that the word literally means "to make a hole" and stating further that "the meaning of this expression, long unknown, has been clarified by a manuscript of the Dead Sea: we are dealing with a euphemism". Similarly, while acknowledging the possibility that the word may mean either "meditate" or "walk", the *Jerome Bible Commentary* (1968) goes on to say "More likely is a more recent suggestion, based on the reading of a rule in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the word means 'to dig a hole' and is a euphemism for relieving nature" (page 25).

We will probably never know for sure why Isaac went out that evening. It is even possible that he had more than one purpose in mind. But the recent suggestion that he had to answer the universal call of nature cannot be excluded.