

# PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

*Published twice yearly  
(April and October)  
by the United Bible  
Societies*

Vol. 34, No. 4, October 1983

EDITOR: Euan Fry

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Jocelyn Murray

---

PAUL ELLINGWORTH

## TRANSLATING PARALLEL PASSAGES IN THE GOSPELS

**Dr. Paul Ellingworth** is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Aberdeen, Scotland

Translators usually begin with the gospels. As they get into their work, they soon discover three simple facts about them:

**First**, John is different from the other gospels, which are called “synoptic” because they tell the story of Jesus from the same general point of view.

**Second**, there are many passages in which Matthew, Mark and Luke can be closely compared. There are several good synopses which print them in parallel columns to make this comparison easier. (See the end of this article for details.)

**Third**, even where the first three gospels, or at least two of them, can be closely compared, there are many differences of detail between them.

The purpose of this article is to examine some of the differences found in parallel passages, and to suggest how they may be dealt with in translation.

### Basic principles

Most translation teams begin by working out principles and procedures for their work (although these are usually left flexible, and may be modified as the work goes on). The translation of the synoptic gospels is usually part of a larger project. Therefore, although translators may need to make special rules for translating the gospels, these should be in harmony with the rules worked out for the project as a whole.

In this article we shall assume that translators have decided to make a “dynamic equivalent” translation: that is, a translation which aims above all to reproduce the meaning of the original text, rather than its individual words or its grammatical structures. From this, two more principles follow:

The first principle is that all translators, but especially dynamic equivalence translators, aim to reproduce the full meaning of the text, and no more. Dynamic equivalent translations may state what is only hinted at in the text, if the readers are likely to need this extra help. They may even leave something unstated which the text states in words, if the readers of the translation are sure to know it. For example, whether the translation has “Jordan” or “River Jordan” depends on whether the readers will know that the Jordan is a river, rather than on whether a word for “river” is in the Greek text of one gospel or another.

Secondly, in a dynamic equivalent translation, the same meaning can be expressed in different ways. The structure of the sentence may vary with-

out changing the meaning. Translators are free to choose the grammatical form which best conveys the meaning.

### **The most important question**

Therefore, whenever a translator is faced with a difference between one synoptic gospel and another, the most important question he must ask himself is this: *Is the meaning different, or are the gospel writers just saying the same thing in different words?* If the meaning is different, even if the difference is only one of emphasis, then translators must respect it, and try to find ways of reproducing it in translation. If the gospel writers are just saying the same thing in different words, translators are not bound to translate the two texts differently.

#### *Different words with the same meaning*

This question can be asked about individual words and phrases. The Greek word for "like (a dove)" used in Matthew 3.16 is different from that used in Mark 1.10 and Luke 3.22, but the meaning is exactly the same. So, almost certainly, are "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2.7) and "Who can forgive sins but God only?" (Luke 5.21). (These and most other quotations are from RSV, but where necessary, a more literal translation has been made.)

#### *Restructuring*

In other places, the synoptic gospels may look very different from one another at first sight, but when the texts are examined more closely, the meaning is seen to be the same. The reason for this is that the gospel writers were doing exactly what dynamic equivalent translators do themselves: that is, using different grammatical structures to convey the same meaning.

For example, Mark 1.4 and Luke 3.3 speak of John "preaching a baptism of repentance", using two abstract nouns. But these are replaced by verbs in Matthew 3.2, which has John "saying: 'repent.'" Luke's account of John the Baptist's preaching consists of one long sentence (3.16–17), part of which reads: ". . . whose winnowing fork is in his hand, *to clear* his threshing floor, and *to gather* the wheat into his granary." Matthew 3.12 prefers finite verbs: "he will clear . . . and gather . . .". Compare also Mark 1.10 ("coming up") with Matthew 3.16 ("he came up"); and Luke 6.49 ("having built") with Matthew 7.26 ("he built"). There is no difference of meaning.

#### *Singular and plural*

Sometimes a singular noun refers to a whole class of objects, and may be translated by a plural noun, as GNB does in Matthew 6.22: "the eyes are like" (literally, "the eye is") "a lamp for the body". The gospel writers make this kind of change quite freely: Matthew 3.8 has "fruit", but Luke 3.7 has "fruits"; Matthew 8.4 has "the gift which Moses commanded", but Mark 1.44 has "what" (plural in the Greek) "Moses commanded"; and in Luke 6.45, the good man does "the good", but in Matthew 12.35, he does "good things". Similarly, in Mark 2.20, Jesus says that "in that day" the disciples will fast. The context shows that Jesus is not speaking about a single day, but about the whole period following his death. This is confirmed by Luke 5.35, which uses the plural "days". In many languages, translators will use a plural in such cases, whether

the noun used by the gospel writer is singular or plural, in order to make the plural meaning clear.

### *Nouns and pronouns*

A pronoun, as the name suggests, takes the place of a noun, usually a noun previously used: "*John* came in; *he* sat down." Languages vary according to how often they repeat nouns, and how often they rely on pronouns or equivalent forms. So do individual speakers and writers of a language; and the gospel writers are no exception. Mark 6.18 has "John said to Herod", but Matthew 14.4 has simply "John said to him"; similarly Mark 11.15 and Luke 19.45 "(he) going into the temple", but Matthew 21.12 "Jesus went into the temple"; also Matthew 4.18 "Simon and Andrew his brother", but Mark 1.16 "Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon". Many such examples could be quoted. In all these cases, translators must ask: Is it clear who is doing what? If it is not clear, one way of helping the reader will probably be to add nouns where the text has none. The synoptic parallels confirm that there need be no change in meaning—on condition, of course, that the *correct* noun is added.

### *Verb forms*

Languages vary greatly in their use of verbs, and in the meanings which different verb-forms convey. In Greek, as in some other languages, the present tense is often used to refer to past events. Many verbs in the synoptic gospels, especially Mark, are present in form but past in meaning. The other gospel writers recognize this, and often use verbs which are past in grammar as well as in meaning.

Even generally literal translations, such as RSV, recognize this too. For example, in Mark 2.5, where RSV has "he said to the paralytic", the Greek is literally "he says"; but in the parallels, Matthew 9.2 and Luke 5.20, the Greek verb is past, "he said". Similarly in Mark 2.8, 10 and the parallels Matthew 9.3, 5 and Luke 5.22, 24; also Matthew 4.19 ("says") and Mark 1.17 ("said"), and many other places. In all such cases, translators should use whatever verb-form best conveys the past event; they should not be misled by the Greek grammatical present into using an unnatural or misleading form in their own language.

These examples should not be confused with others in which the gospel writers use different verb forms which really do suggest a different meaning, or at least a different point of view. On the borderline is the parallel between Matthew 7.26, "everyone hearing . . . and not doing" and Luke 6.49, "he who having heard and not having done . . .": the difference is one of point of view rather than meaning, and the information given is probably the same. More significant is the difference between Matthew 6.11, where the Greek for "give us today" suggests a single event, and the more general "give us day by day" of Luke 11.3, where the Greek present imperative means "go on giving us (repeatedly)". A similar and striking example is the difference between Matthew 21.15, where Jesus says of the traders in the temple: "you make (God's house) a den of robbers", Mark 11.17, which has "but you have made it" (perfect tense, suggesting a process extending from the past into the present), and Luke 19.46 "but you made it . . ." (aorist tense, suggesting a

single, completely past event). See also Matthew 9.17 and Mark 2.22, which use a present tense where the parallel Luke 5.37 uses the future. These distinctions should be kept in translation wherever possible, because they represent differences of meaning, not only of grammar.

### *Active and passive*

Translating the passive can be difficult: a literal translation may be unnatural, or suggest something unpleasant (see David Filbeck's article in the July 1972 issue of *The Bible Translator*). Greek uses passive forms freely, but occasionally the synoptic gospels remind us that passive and active forms can be used to convey the same meaning. For example, where Luke 12.58 has the active "lest . . . the officer put you in prison", the parallel in Matthew 5.25 has the passive "lest . . . you be put in prison". Here, there is some difference of meaning, since Luke states plainly who is putting people in prison, and Matthew does not. Yet in languages which make little use of the passive, it is reasonable for translators to use the parallel in Luke to help them find a natural translation of the corresponding verse in Matthew.

### *Direct and indirect speech*

The synoptic gospels, especially Matthew and Luke, contain many sayings, some reported in direct speech and some in indirect. The meaning is usually the same, though in the following example there are other slight differences:

<p>"Do not seek what you are to eat or what you are to drink, or be of anxious mind" (Luke 12.29, indirect speech).</p>	<p>"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' . . ." (Matthew 18.31, direct speech).</p>
---	--

In such cases, it may be equally natural to use direct or indirect speech in translation. However, if one form is distinctly clearer or more natural than the other in the language of the readers, it should be used, irrespective of which form is used in the original.

### *Rhetorical questions*

Rhetorical questions create another familiar problem for translators. These are questions which do not ask for information, but which are a vivid way of making a statement.

Some languages use many rhetorical questions; in other languages, they are less natural, and may be misunderstood as real questions asking for information. But the meaning is the same. In translating such parallels as Mark 11.17, "Is it not written . . .?" and Matthew 21.13, Luke 19.46, "It is written . . .", the most natural form should be used.

### *Double negatives*

Another rhetorical device is that of the double negative, which has generally the same meaning as a positive expression. The synoptic gospels use the two forms as alternatives. "They do not fast" in Matthew 9.14 and Mark 2.18 means "they do not not-eat", which Luke 5.33 expresses more simply as "they eat". In Luke 6.29, "do not withhold" means "do not not-give", which Matthew 5.40 simplifies to "let him have". Mark 6.4 is in effect a triple

negative: "A prophet is *not without* honour, *except* in his own country"; Luke 4.24 has a broadly equivalent but simpler saying with a single negative: "No prophet is acceptable in his own country." Here again, translators are free to use whichever form is most natural in their own language.

### *Word order*

All translators, however literally they try to translate, are bound to change the order of words in the original text, or their translation will not make sense. (The shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept", John 11.35, is literally "wept the Jesus", but no sensible person would put this in an English translation.) Changes of word order are frequent between one gospel and another. They need careful handling, because some of them convey differences of emphasis. The translator therefore needs to develop a sense of what is the normal order in the original text, and why a gospel writer should change it. It should also be remembered that some languages are more flexible than others in the ways they arrange words in sentences: Greek, for example, is relatively flexible, and English relatively inflexible. In most languages, the beginning and the end of sentences are the most emphatic positions. However, since Greek word order is flexible, too much significance should probably not be given to the difference between such parallels as:

"I you baptize with water"  
(Matthew 3.11)

"I with water baptize you"  
(Luke 3.16)

Or:

"Authority has the Son  
of man on earth to for-  
give sins"  
(Matthew 9.6)

"Authority has the  
Son of man to forgive  
sins on earth"  
(Mark 2.10)

"The Son of man  
authority has on earth  
to forgive sins"  
(Luke 5.24)

### *Explicit and implicit information*

One gospel writer will often put into words something which another leaves unstated, or one writer may express something more precisely than another. (We use the term "explicit" for what is clearly stated in words; and we use the term "implicit" for meaning that is not stated in words, but left to the reader to fill in from his own understanding.) For example, Luke's "no *servant* can serve two masters" (16.13) is more explicit than Matthew's "no one can serve two masters" (6.24), but the meaning is essentially the same. Similarly, Luke's "what *father* among you . . .?" brings out the meaning of Matthew's more general "What man of you . . .?" (7.9). Such variations cause few problems in translation, because most languages have both implicit and explicit ways of speaking and writing. Only when one form is unnatural, or open to misunderstanding, should it be avoided in translation. Otherwise, the reader should be able to see from the translation that one gospel writer expresses himself more generally than another. For example, Matthew's statement "the good man out of his good treasure brings forth good" (12.35) is given a more precise meaning in Luke 6.45: "the good man out of the good treasure *of his heart* . . .".

Similarly, Matthew 12.1 and Luke 6.1 state that the disciples “ate” the grain which they plucked, while Mark 2.23 leaves this to be inferred.

More important are the differences between the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke, where Matthew is usually more general and Luke more specific:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit”

(Matthew 5.3)

“Blessed are you poor”

(Luke 6.20)

“Blessed are those who hunger and  
thirst for righteousness (6.6)

“Blessed are you that hunger now”  
(6.21)

In many such cases, it is quite possible that one writer believed that he was only making clear something which was implied in the earlier tradition. However this may be, in fact he is saying something different, and the difference should be kept in translation. Authors, such as the gospel writers, even when they are handing on a historical tradition, have greater freedom than translators can allow themselves!

### **A general principle**

The principle underlined near the beginning of this article can now be stated more strongly, in the light of the examples quoted. On the one hand, where parallels have strictly the same meaning, the translator is free to translate them in the same way; that is, in whatever way is most natural in the receptor language. But if two expressions are equally natural, he is not obliged to choose between them. On the other hand, where differences between the synoptics, however slight, involve a difference of meaning, that difference must be respected in translation. The translator should not make the gospels sound more alike than they are: each gospel writer should be allowed to speak with his own voice, to give his own witness.

### **Three final points**

Nothing in this article depends on a particular theory about how the synoptic gospels are related to one another, or in what direction changes were likely to be made. Most scholars, though not all, believe in fact that Mark wrote first, and that Matthew and Luke knew Mark’s gospel. If this is so, it may be that Mark stands closer to the historical events of Jesus’ life than Matthew or Luke. But this is a problem for the historian, not directly for the translator, who has no right to “correct” one gospel to bring it in line with another.

Secondly, nothing in this article depends on speculation about the original Aramaic which Jesus usually spoke, and of which only a few words remain. Almost all the sayings in the gospels are themselves translations, and experts in Aramaic can sometimes help translators of the gospels to understand otherwise difficult expressions, or to choose between several possible meanings of the Greek. But the gospels themselves as we have them are in Greek, and the Greek is what we have to translate, not something with a different meaning which may underlie the Greek text. For example, it is possible that in the saying, “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5.48), “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6.36), the words for “perfect” and “merciful” have a common basis in Aramaic. How-

ever that may be, it is certain that the two words do not mean the same in Greek, and they must therefore be translated differently.

Lastly, dynamic equivalent translators may be encouraged to see, from most of the examples which we have quoted, how much their way of working has in common with that of the gospel writers themselves. At some stage between the preaching of Jesus and the writing of the gospels, there must have been people translating from Aramaic to Greek. The evidence suggests that their translations were more concerned to be faithful to the meaning than to the form of what was said by Jesus, and those with whom he spoke. If that is so, dynamic equivalent translators are in good company.

### NOTE ON SYNOPSES

The fullest Greek-English synopsis is K. Aland's *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Stuttgart, 3rd edition 1979). The Greek edition is entitled *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart, 9th edition 1976), and there is now an English edition, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Stuttgart, 1982). There is also a simpler synopsis of the Greek text by A. Huck: *Synopsis of the First Three Gospels with the Addition of the Johannine Parallels*, revised by H. Greeven (Tubingen, 13th edition 1981).

JACOB A. LOEWEN

## THE "WORLD" IN JOHN'S GOSPEL THROUGH WEST AFRICAN EYES

**Dr. Jacob Loewen** is a UBS Translations Consultant resident in Canada

The Greek word *kosmos*, which is consistently translated as "world" in RSV (except in Jn 17.12 where it is left implicit), is one of the words in John's writings that often requires more than one rendering in West African languages.

If we look at a Greek lexicon it soon becomes clear that John uses this word in several different ways and with very different components of meaning in different contexts. Arndt and Gingrich, for example, suggest that the range of meaning of *kosmos* in John can be subdivided into the following:

1. the ordered universe (17.5, 17.24)
2. the earth in contrast to heaven (6.14, 9.39)
3. the universe in which man lives (12.25, 16.21)
4. mankind (8.12, 9.5)
5. everybody (12.19, 18.20)
6. the system which is at enmity with God (8.23, 12.31)

A fuller discussion of these different areas of meaning is given in the article by R. G. Bratcher, "The meaning of *kosmos*, 'world', in the New Testament" (TBT, October 1980, pages 430-434).

Not only the older formal correspondence translations like RSV, but even newer common language versions like the Good News Bible do not distinguish many of the variations of meaning of *kosmos* in John; and the German