

from the threshing floor also hides her journey home. Naomi, unable to see Ruth hidden in darkness, but aware of her presence, eagerly asks, "Is that you, daughter?" So the storyteller masterfully assures his readers that Ruth reached home unseen—the secret of her meeting with Boaz is safe.

A parallel circumstance of the presence of an unseen person which prompts the same question is found in the account of Isaac's blessing of Jacob, Gen 27.18-29. Isaac has sent his older son Esau to hunt and cook the meat and bring it to him before he gives Esau his blessing. But Jacob, the younger brother, impersonates Esau and presents himself and the cooked meat to Isaac. Now Isaac is expecting Esau to return, but he is also blind. So when Jacob arrives, Isaac is aware of the presence of someone but he cannot see that person. It is the inability to see the person that makes Isaac ask the question, *mi 'atta beni*, literally "Who are you, son?" Of course Isaac did not need an introduction to his son. He could not see which one of his two sons was before him and the force of his question was, "Who is it, son? Are you Esau or Jacob?"

Isaac's question *mi 'atta beni* is identical in form to Naomi's question *mi 'at bitti*. When we compare the circumstance and linguistic usage in both instances we are convinced that Naomi's question is an inquiry about identity and not welfare.

Isaac's question is appropriate to a situation where the person addressed is known and expected, but visual confirmation is impossible because he is blind. So also Naomi's question is appropriate to a situation where the person addressed is known and expected, but visual confirmation is impossible because Ruth is hidden from view. Naomi's question *mi 'at bitti* has the force, "Who is it? Is it you, daughter?", or restructured, "Is that you, daughter?"

Translators and revisers who want an accurate translation of Naomi's question should render it: "Is that you, daughter?". The New King James Version has after all revised KJV to read, "Is that you, daughter?"

BASIL REBERA

"For our sake God made him share our sin"? (2 Corinthians 5.21, GNB)

This is perhaps one of the most striking statements in the Bible. It is also one of the most difficult to translate, and one of the places at which the GNB translation has been most criticised.

Some of the criticism is unfair. "Christ did not **share** our sin; he **bore** our sin," is a typical comment. Two things may be said in reply. First, if Paul had wanted to say "God made him bear our sin", there were other ways of putting it in Greek. Three different words are used for carrying sin, or carrying it away; GNB translates them all as "take

away” (Jn 1.29; Heb 10.4,11). In Is 53.11, GNB speaks of God’s servant as one who will bear the sin of many. But in 2 Cor 5.21, what Paul says, literally translated, is: “the not-knowing sin for us sin he-made, so that we (emphatic) might-become righteousness of-God in him.” To translate this as “God made him bear our sin” would be at least as much an “interpretation” (in the bad sense) as what GNB has done.

In the second place, such criticism willfully misunderstands the use of the word “share” in this verse. The English word “share” has two main meanings, which one might call “share in” and “share out”, or “participate” and “divide up”. Some languages have different words for them (for example, *participer* and *partager* in French). You share in worship without dividing it up! In this verse, it is clearly a question of Christ “sharing in” our sin, not of dividing it up so that he takes only part of it. However, it is a golden rule that if a translation can be misunderstood, it will be, and the translator’s duty is to avoid every misunderstanding he can. We shall come back to this question later.

Meanwhile, beyond the problem of what Paul says, is the deeper problem of what he means—“interpretation” in the good sense, which is a necessary preparation for translation. There are two main ways of understanding it.

The first and simpler way is to take the word translated “sin” to mean “sin-offering”. This is extremely tempting. The corresponding Hebrew word can mean either “sin” or “sin-offering”. Although “sin-offering” is not a normal meaning of the Greek word, it is often used in this sense in the “translation Greek” of the Septuagint, the version which Paul and other New Testament writers commonly used; for example, in Lev 4.8,20,21,24,25,29,32; 5.9,12; 6.17,25; 8.2,14. The most common way in which the Septuagint speaks of the sin-offering is literally “the for-sin”, without any word for sacrifice. All this may have influenced the way in which Paul expresses himself in this verse.

This is an explanation chosen, or at least suggested as a possible alternative, in NEB note, NIV note, and most recently in the text of the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB, 1985): “For our sake he made the sinless one a victim for sin...” This is a change from the old Jerusalem Bible (JB), which had the translation “For our sake God made the sinless one into sin”, and a weak note which spoke of “a kind of legal fiction”. The NJB note is much better; it reads:

God made Christ one with sinful humanity in order to make the human race one with his obedience and saving justice...Perhaps ‘victim for sin’ should here be taken as meaning ‘sin’, since the same Hebrew word *hatta’t* can have both senses, see Lev 4.1—5.13.

Some of the arguments offered against this interpretation are not very strong. One is that Paul would not have reduced the death of Christ to the status of an Old Testament sin-offering. This is obviously true; yet it would not have prevented Paul from using the language of Old Testament sacrifice in speaking of the unique offering of Christ, just as the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Christ as high priest. A second

argument, found in *The Translator's New Testament (TNT)* (page 485), is that the translation "sin-offering" "hardly fits the context". But in its note on 2 Cor 2.15 (page 484), TNT allows for the possibility that Paul may be speaking of his own ministry in the language of sacrifice. A third argument, perhaps the strongest, is that the word translated "sin" does not mean "sin-offering" anywhere else in the New Testament, though Paul uses similar language in Rom 8.3.

Most translations and commentaries, however, take the more common meaning "sin", and make sense of it in its context. The problem is not quite the same for commentators, who are most concerned with the theology of the passage, as for translators, who are concerned with more practical matters.

Commentators discuss the wider question of what it means to say that Christ by his death on the cross did "for us", even "in our place", for our salvation, something which we could never have done for ourselves. It is in this sense that the old evangelical scholar James Denney wrote of this verse, with fine rhetoric:

It is not the puzzle of the New Testament, but the ultimate solution of all puzzles; it is not an irrational quantity that has to be eliminated or explained away, but the keystone of the whole system of apostolic thought. It is not a blank obscurity in revelation, a spot of impenetrable blackness; it is the focus in which the reconciling love of God burns with the purest and intensest flame; it is the fountain light of all day, the master light of all seeing, in the Christian revelation (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1894, page 218).

But on the other hand, Rudolf Bultmann, generally considered as a liberal, writing in his last course of lectures, found essentially the same meaning in this text:

...Christ is seen and treated by God as a sinner (compare Rom 8.3)...The treatment of Christ as sinner takes place in this way: God lets him die as a sinner on the cross (Gal 3.13). So the words "for us" have the same sense as in verse 14: Christ died in our place (*Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, 1975, pages 166-7).

But translators, especially those who are not content just to transfer individual words from one language to another, have to ask more persistently: "What, exactly, does it **mean**?" Traditional word-for-word translations do not need to face this problem. They can glide over the surface: "It says 'sin', so we'll put 'sin'." More thoughtful people need to go deeper. The evangelical scholar F. F. Bruce, in his *Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul* (1965, reprinted 1981), shows that he is aware of the problem by translating "...the One whom God has appointed to be 'sin' on our behalf...", and adds a useful note; but ordinary working translators cannot rely on notes to make the meaning clear, and quotation marks do not of themselves explain anything.

Leaving aside word-for-word translations, and those which take the meaning "sin-offering", translators generally adopt one of the following

strategies.

First, they take the words "be sin" to mean that Christ was identified with our sin. J.B. Phillips, for example, says that "God caused Christ...actually to be sin for our sakes"; but the addition of "actually", and the emphasizing of "be", only point to the problem, like Bruce's quotation marks. The French interconfessional version (TOB), translates: "[God], for us, identified him with sin". Such language is often used, not only in French: we speak of "identifying ourselves with the local situation", when we probably mean something like "being sympathetic and sensitive in our dealings with others". But this is a weakened meaning of "identify". No one can literally make himself, or be made, identical with anyone or anything else. NEB expresses the same meaning more simply: "for our sake God made him one with the sinfulness of men."

Second, one or two translations follow the interpretation of Bultmann and many others (see above). Among these, the German common language translation is perhaps the clearest: "God condemned Christ as a sinner in our place." This is clear, and fits well with other New Testament texts, such as 1 Cor 15.3, one of the earliest summaries of the Christian faith. The only question is whether it is exactly what Paul meant here. If so, why did he say that God made Christ, not "a sinner", but "sin"?

Third, some translations follow the "legal fiction" interpretation of the old Jerusalem Bible. The Spanish common language New Testament has: "For us, God treated him as if he were a sinner"; and the European Portuguese common language translation expresses the same thought less strongly: "God, for our good, considered him a sinner." This is a valiant attempt to find meaning in the text; but it is a serious weakening of what Paul actually says, namely that God made Christ sin for us.

Finally, some translations, without translating the Greek term as "sin-offering", appear to think of the act by which the priest, in laying his hands on the animal to be sacrificed, transferred to it the sins of the worshippers. The French common language Bible translates: "God burdened [or 'loaded'] him with our sin"; and this is followed with slight variations by the Dutch and Italian common language translations.

This raises the question of whether, after all, the two main interpretations are really very far apart. The sin-offering was a means whereby sin was taken away from the people and transferred to the sacrifice. Before the sacrifice, the sin contaminated the worshippers; at the moment of sacrifice, the sin became identified with the animal. Of course, from a Christian point of view, this did not work; and even the Old Testament speaks of serious sins which could not be dealt with by animal sacrifice. But the Old Testament sacrifices were, for Paul and other New Testament writers, a powerful symbol or anticipation of what Christ had achieved by his sacrificial death.

So how are we to translate it? In some languages, it may be quite impossible to speak of a person being "made sin"; for a person is a

concrete noun, and sin is an abstraction. In any case, the best choice seems to be between the language of identification, something like “for our sake God made him one with human sinfulness”, and the language of sin-offering, along the lines of NJB, “for our sake God made the sinless one a victim for sin”. Perhaps the first interpretation could be expressed in the text, and the second in a note.

Since this note began by mentioning criticism of GNB, it would be good to leave the last word with Dr R. G. Bratcher, the principal translator of the GNB New Testament. In his *Translator's Guide to Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians* (1983, page 62), he offers as a model the following translation of the passage:

Christ (himself) never committed any sin, but for our sake God treated him as a sinner. As a result we, in union with Christ (or, by being followers of Christ), are in the right relationship with God (or, are pleasing to God).

PAUL ELLINGWORTH

The translation of Matthew 5.2

It may be impossible to translate *kai anoixas to stoma autou edidasken autous legon* (Mt 5.2) in a way that will win the unqualified approval of all scholars. However, it is rather obvious that a literal translation of the verse makes little sense. AV, for example, translates these three clauses as follows: “And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,”. Here we might ask ourselves in fun how Jesus could have taught anything without first opening his mouth, and whether Matthew was aware that he was committing such a blatant example of surplusage.

To avoid the awkwardness of a literal translation, translators resort to a free translation. The results may be divided into two groups, depending on the translation given to *anoixas to stoma autou*, “opened his mouth”. The first group is represented by JB and NEB. With them *anoixas to stoma autou* is taken as referring to the act of speaking or of addressing an audience, and is understood as meaning that the action is just beginning:

JB: “Then he began to speak. This is what he taught them:”

NEB: “...he began to address them. And this is the teaching he gave:”

The second group of free translations is represented by NIV, GNB, LB and Phillips. These translators understand *anoixas to stoma autou* to be pleonastic, or merely filling out the meaning of the rest of the sentence, and therefore omit the words altogether in translating the verse:

NIV: “...and he began to teach them, saying:”

GNB: “...and he began to teach them:”

LB: “...and taught them there.”