

TRANSLATING SIGNS AND SYMBOLS IN THE GOSPELS

The author is UBS Distribution Consultant for Europe, with special responsibility for matters of publication and communication. Of Swiss nationality, he is now based in London after many years in Africa. His article reflects on the translation of the gospels from the point of view of communication theory.

1. SIGNS, SYMBOLS AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Our *mental structures* are like the building plan on which the words and the experiences engraved in our brains are organized. The building stones are basically our bodily experiences, that is, our physical reactions to the objects we touch and our bodily movements as we participate in various events. These sensations and images are recorded in our memories like a film, that is, a series of what Edmund Leach¹ calls "sense images".

Language, whether perceived as sound (in speech) or as sight (in print) consists of indices standing for sense images. These result from the many repeated encounters we have experienced and verbalised in the past, the objects and events we have seen, the noises and music we have heard, the things we have smelled, touched and tasted. We are, however, not animals. We can speak about these experiences using words and sentences. We are able to describe to others what happened and how we felt about them.

The *words* (sounds, and written marks) which form our language function in different ways according to how they relate to the sense images created in our minds when we hear them spoken or read them in a written text. Edmund Leach² and others speak of *signs* when the relation between the index (he also calls it "signum") and the sense image is *metonymic* that is: obvious, immediate (syntagmatic), conventional, habitual and univocal (the word "crown" is obviously and immediately related to a "royal headgear"). He speaks of *symbol* when this relation is *metaphoric*, that is, not obvious, not immediate, (paradigmatic), not habitual but analogical and plurivocal. The words "a crown of thorns" can mean more than the object they denote; they can become the symbol of the burden of being the head of a nation as well as of the suffering of the servant king.

When we read or hear words which are immediately, obviously, univocally linked with a particular sense-image in our minds, they function as *signs* ("My friend took my hand" uses words as signs). When, however, the same words call up a multiplicity of sense images in our mind, they function as *symbols* ("Jesus took my hand" uses words as symbols).

Four axioms can be formulated concerning the way such word clusters function in practice:

- (i) It is the context in which they are said or written which makes it possible for the speaker or writer to use them as signs or as symbols. This context is determined by the sender who introduces words in his discourse. (By replacing "my friend" by "Jesus" in the example above, the word "hand" becomes a symbol, because Jesus cannot take my physical hand).

¹ *Culture and Communication, the logic by which symbols are connected.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

² *Ibid.*

- (ii) Whatever the sender wants to say, it is the way the receptor interprets what he reads or hears which makes words function as either signs or symbols. This interpretation is determined by the mental structures of the receptor. For example, the sentence about Jesus taking my hand will be interpreted as an irrelevant Christian stereotype by an atheist.
- (iii) When a receptor repeatedly perceives a cluster of spoken or written words meant by the sender to function as symbols, he will tend to relate his perception to his previous experience of the same word cluster. Instead of calling up a multiplicity of sense images in his mind, the intended symbol will remind the receptor of the sounds of the word cluster. The symbol ultimately functions like a sign. For example, the word cluster "Jesus taking my hand" loses its evocative power and becomes a cliché, even for Christians!
- (iv) In a dialogue, the moment one person explains his own interpretation of a symbol to another, he singles out certain sense images from the many his memory could relate to the word cluster. He tends therefore to limit the number of sense images his partner will link with the symbolic expression. If we repeatedly hear such explanations, and even use them ourselves, the words ultimately become stereotypes or clichés, and the symbols become signs. For example, every time we explain to our audiences that Jesus extends his hand towards us so that we may hold it and be saved, we destroy the very message we want to convey; the hand of Jesus becomes a cliché.

The way words in context can function either as signs or as symbols is important for our study and translation of religious literature. For religion, by definition, is concerned with non-physical and hence non-observable reality, or, as Rudolf Otto called it, "the wholly other". We cannot, by definition, have a bodily experience of God. The only observable phenomenon is our perception of the words of humans who speak and write about him. The claim that God cannot be perceived by the senses but that he has an ultimate meaning for them means that we use word clusters which are mainly symbolical, whether they be direct metaphors for God and his world or whether they have become clichés which do not arouse our imagination any more.

The symbols we use to communicate what we call "religious experiences" must have their roots in our sense images, that is, physical experiences. When Professor J. van Baal³ defines religion (or the religious) as "*all explicit or implicit notions and ideas accepted as true which relate to a reality which cannot be verified empirically*", he presupposes that we all share a common language based on common empirical experiences. To speak about God as a loving Father means that we are ready to relate our sense images of loving and of a father to the mysterious source of life.

But religious experience is not only shared cross-culturally but also between children and adults. Religious symbols must therefore relate to sense images

³ J. van Baal, *Symbols for communication, an introduction to the anthropological study of religion*. Assen: van Gorcum & Co., 1971.

which are not only universal but also result from our earliest perceptions. Gilbert Durand⁴ has proposed that what enables us to understand other people's interpretations of "the holy" is due to the fact that, one day, we were all born, we all swallowed our mother's milk, sucked her breast and cried rhythmically. This is why we can understand the way people all over the world speak about God and the meaning of human life. This is also why the biblical authors' use of symbolic language to communicate their own religious experience and message has been accessible at all times, to all humans, all over the world.

But the biblical discourse is unique. For, whilst it borrows the symbolic expressions from the non-biblical religions of its neighbours to speak about God's actions in the world, it sets them into a "non-religious" framework. They do not eliminate or rationalize religious symbolism, on the contrary, they relate it in a new way to the reality which can be verified empirically. They establish the limits between the world of senses and perception and the world of faith, and propose a new covenant between God and humanity. It is essential that Bible translators recognize how this was done so that they do not obscure the specificity of the texts they translate. In this article, I try to analyse how the writers of the Gospels used the symbols of their own religious tradition by setting them into an empirical context to communicate their extraordinary religious experience to their readers.

2. THE JUXTAPOSITION OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS IN THE GOSPELS

The translation of the Gospel narratives should make it clear that:

- (i) *The words used by the evangelists to indicate the time and place of events and to convey audience reactions to the person of Jesus are recognized as signs.*
- (ii) *These signs should be clearly contrasted with the symbols introduced into the narrative to communicate the mystery of the incarnation.*

The accuracy of the evangelists' statements concerning the place and time of Jesus' actions has been challenged by last century's biblical scholars as if the writers were modern biographers. Many concluded that the authors of the Gospels were pseudo-historians, that the different oral traditions they collated were contradictory and that the details recorded were "untrustworthy". This contention does not consider that the main concern of the evangelists was to show that the events they describe had actually taken place in space and time. They wrote about a real sea of Galilee in which the disciples washed their clothes, Jerusalem was built out of stones and bricks and Jesus was not a symbolic man (one more Apollo walking among us).

But it is not only the times and the places of the Gospel stories which are fixed. The evangelists also describe the actions and the reactions of those who see Jesus living among them and who hear his speeches. His audiences are categorized as Pharisees, teachers, priests, Romans. These words denote real people and are not symbols for "baddies" or "goodies". They indicate human

⁴ Gilbert Durand, *Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*. Paris: Bordas, 1973.

and realistic responses to the perception of the man Jesus: amazement anger, fear, happiness. Each of these characters is very close to us. I believe that if we neglect the setting of the Gospel narratives in the life of Jesus himself and emphasize only their "life setting" in the early church, we betray their intentions.

When we translate words denoting time and place, persons and events, we should make sure that the expressions we use are down-to-earth. The context should mark them as signs and call up concrete sense images. When the Good News Bible adds words like "river" to "the Jordan" or "the town of" to "Samaria" it does more than making the implicit explicit; it brings the reader down-to-earth. The helps for readers of the Common French Bible are also noteworthy: they indicate the distance from Jerusalem of most localities.

But the evangelists wanted to go beyond the world of bodily experiences and perceptions. They believed that the person they were writing about was truly human whilst being at the same time "Lord, Messiah and Son of God". These three words belonged to the religious language of their audiences, but they were not used indiscriminately. They were contrasted with expressions normally used to signify natural and psychological phenomena. This confrontation of the reality of this world with a "wholly other reality" is not "primitive", "naive", "childish", but a fascinating technique to open the heart and mind of the readers and hearers to new ways of thinking.

In the Christmas story, for instance, Luke introduces the shepherds after the factual description of the birth of an ordinary child. Then, without transition, he speaks of an angel of the Lord appearing to them (Luke 2.9). The contrast is so amazing that a later scribe may have added the marker "*idou*" between "the flocks" and "the angels" to avoid the abrupt passing from sign to symbol.⁵

The shepherds then behave very naturally and want to see "this thing that happened that the Lord has told us". In the Greek, the word "angel" does not appear any more but only two symbols: "Lord" and "God". When the common language translators introduce the word "angel" in verses 17 and 20 as the agent of an action Luke probably described in the passive of divine avoidance, they overload the text with symbolic words which detract from the realistic description of Mary's and the shepherds' reactions.

John, the evangelist, also confronts the religious symbols of his audiences with words denoting concrete persons and objects. He starts with strings of symbols: "Before the world was created" (we have no bodily experience of that time engraved in our brain) "the Word . . . was with God . . ." (John 1.1). But in verse 6, the Greek just says "there came (*egeneto*) a human (*anthropos*) sent from God; his name was John". What can be more metonymic than calling a man John? After this interlude, the author continues to use symbols up to verse 13: "becoming the children of God the Father". The text then reaches its climax with verse 14. The Logos is suddenly confronted with the word *sarx*. The Word had been clearly marked as belonging to divine reality, the unobservable, the intangible. Suddenly and unexpectedly, it becomes a "human

⁵ Luke 2.9. The UBS Greek NT (3rd corrected edition 1983) gives a C rating for the text having *kai* without *idou*. This rating "means that there is a considerable degree of doubt whether the text or the apparatus contains the superior reading" (xiii).

being". The word *sarx* stands for our daily existential experience: we wake up, stretch ourselves, and sometimes it hurts. The evangelist wanted his readers to be shocked by the clash between the word *sarx* (that which we can touch) and the symbolic "Word of God". For the sentence: *kai logos sarx egeneto* links immediately the symbol "divine word" with the sign "muscle", "meat" (and, only metaphorically, "human nature"). The verb *egeneto* is generally used to describe an observable phenomenon and, in itself, takes the word of God out of its symbolic context. The Good News Bible translation: "He who was the word became a human being" seems to weaken the contrast which John made.

3. THE CHALLENGE TO RELIGIOUS STEREOTYPES

The translation of the Gospel narratives should make it clear that:

- (i) *Jesus used Old Testament symbols which had become stereotypes in a paradoxical way in order to challenge his audiences to understand his presence among them and his purpose in religious categories.*
- (ii) *After their experience of the risen Christ, the evangelists wanted their audiences to understand that the symbols they used in speaking of God could also be used of the Jesus they had seen hanging on the cross.*

All four evangelists show how they re-interpreted the experience of the disciples of Jesus when they had seen him alive after his crucifixion. They understood and described his actions in Old Testament terms. They showed him applying to himself titles like "Son of Man" in an unexpected way. He did not contradict those who saw in him the Messiah or even the Son of God, but he only used these symbols in the context of dialogues during which his listeners were invited to discard their stereotyped religious concepts.

Thus, the evangelists show that every time his audiences interpreted him to be a religious person, he brought them back into the world of the five senses. But when he felt he was less likely to be misunderstood, he applied these very religious symbols to himself with the result that the crowds were amazed, and the teachers of the law furious. Little by little the apostles discovered that Jesus' presence had really been God's own factual presence which could be recognized by those who had eyes to see and ears to hear. Jesus was not a heavenly being disguising himself as a man, nor was he a man giving an image of God, but he was the unthinkable, God made accessible to their senses. The full experience of faith could only take place once they had seen, heard and touched their Master after his death on the cross.

Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman (John 4.1–42) starts with his request for water and her factual remark that Jews don't speak to Samaritans. Jesus then shifts the dialogue to the symbolic level: the gift of God. The woman does not understand this but feels that she is dealing with someone religious. She knows, however, that the man in front of her is an ordinary person. He cannot be greater than Jacob, a stereotype of her mythical ancestor. But Jesus takes her a step further. He contrasts "this water in the well" with a "spring of water which leaps up into eternal life". In this second symbol, he links the gift of God with eternity.

The woman, again, remains factual. She does not understand the symbolism and wants the gift so that she does not have to come back to the well. Jesus then asks her to call her husband. After Jesus mentions her marital situation, she calls him a “prophet”, the second stereotype to describe her intuition that: “Here is someone really religious”. But when it comes to religion she knows that she is not a Jew and that “this mountain” is not Jerusalem where Jews worship. Instead of agreeing to discuss the merits of Garizim versus Sion, Jesus breaks with tradition and says: “Believe me, the day will come when neither this mountain, nor that hill will be places of worship . . . God is Spirit . . .”.

This refusal of the mythical approach to holy places which had become a stereotyped sign of the difference between Jews and Samaritans is too much for the woman. This shakes up her whole religious understanding and she can only use the one word to express her astonishment, a third stereotyped symbol: “the Messiah” who will come and explain all this. Without realizing it, she has used the right word, though she does not recognize the man before her as even a forerunner of the Messiah. This is the occasion for Jesus’ self revelation: “I am he”.

There are several pitfalls for the translator in this dialogue. When Jesus answers the woman’s first question, he speaks immediately of God’s gift (a symbolic expression) but his offer of living water may have been understood by the woman as meaning “running water” (a spring) whilst Jacob had dug a well for ground water. She could also have understood “*hudōr zōn*” as a stereotype for “living water”. The new French Bible has “*eau vive*” with a note “*eau courante*” which helps the reader to see the ambiguity when interpreting this text.

Another translation problem is the expression: “a spring which leaps up into eternal life”. The word “spring” relates to the offer of water. Jesus does not clear up the woman’s misunderstanding, but keeps her attention fixed on the symbolism of water. He speaks of it as springing out of the soil towards a life which is different: a gift “out of time”. The paradox created by using the word “eternal life” immediately after the “leaping spring” is essential to the understanding of the story; the woman did misunderstand again whilst the modern reader of the Good News for whom the expression has become a cliché thinks he understands!

In the previous section, I suggested that the evangelists went out of their way to use words as signs when it came to describing the context of Jesus’ life. They then casually introduced religious symbols, to show that the baby, the child and the man people saw living among them was creating very different reactions in his audiences. For some he was a magic healer, for others a freak or a man with unexpected power. But he was not perceived as “a God come down from Heaven” who could somehow disappear. He proved to be mortal as expected. He was crucified publicly.

The evangelists’ use of religious symbols in describing Jesus’ words and actions is curious. His audiences may recognize his authority as a religious teacher but never react unanimously to his invitation to believe in him and to follow him. Even his disciples do not recognize him unequivocally as divine. They see his extraordinary influence over disease and nature, but they do not expect him to be stronger than death. When he is arrested, they all run away.

Yet, retelling this story from their post-resurrection experience, they make it clear that, for them at least, the religious symbols they use when speaking of Jesus before his death are not metaphors, though they may have understood them as such at the time. They describe him as he was and is now for them. He is not like the Messiah, but “the Messiah”, not like the Father but “of the Father”. This is why the Gospels are really a witness that this man Jesus was also “God among us”. They stimulate the readers to believe in him.

The way the evangelists speak of what they heard, saw and felt is of the utmost importance. They know that only believers saw the risen Christ. They cannot appeal to public knowledge for their assertions. They have to invite their readers to believe. They are, however, absolutely convinced that the unbelievable has taken place and that they have to inform the world of what happened to them and justify their faith that the master they had lived with was truly God just as he has been truly man.

Translators should be aware of the dilemma confronting the authors of the Gospels. I believe they should resist any attempt at emphasizing the religious symbolism of the text. On the contrary, it is the evangelists’ very reluctance to use categories which would encourage mythical thinking about Jesus which should be stressed. This is best illustrated when we look at the sixteen resurrection narratives subtitled in the Greek New Testament (to which we can add the five additions to Mark) which help us to discover how they described the bodily experiences of those who met the risen Christ.

4. THE RISEN CHRIST: SIGN OR SYMBOL?

The translation of the resurrection narratives should make clear that:

- (i) *The words used by the evangelists are mainly meant to be understood as signs to describe the disciples’ reactions to the empty grave.*
- (ii) *Jesus’ bodily movements after his resurrection are meant to be understood as signs to describe the humanity of the risen Christ.*

There is a significant difference in the way the evangelists speak of angels when telling the story of the resurrection of Jesus. According to Mark “the women entered the tomb” and “saw a young man” (a *neaniskos*, not an angel) wearing a white robe who speaks quite naturally to them: “Don’t be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus who was crucified; he has risen, go and tell his disciples . . .”.

According to Luke the ladies suddenly see two men (*andres*) in bright shining clothes. The women are not only afraid but also “bow their faces to the ground”. The men ask a question: “Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive?” The words translated “He is not here, he has risen” could be a later addition.⁶

The setting of Matthew’s narrative is different. He actually describes an event observed by the non-believing guards. There is a strong earthquake, the angel of the Lord comes down from Heaven, the guards are afraid of him and faint, the women arrive and are told by the heavenly messenger that Jesus is

⁶ Luke 24.6. D rating, showing “a very high degree of doubt concerning the reading selected for the text” (*ibid.*).

not here and that “He has risen”. The words “from the dead” could be a later addition.⁷ As they go to tell the disciples, they meet Jesus himself who greets them with an ordinary “Good morning” (*chairete*) and repeats the angels’ injunction.

John tells the same story without mentioning any angel, as if he wants to correct the supernatural impression given by Luke and Matthew. Later, however, he introduces “two angels dressed in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been” who begin a dialogue with Mary Magdalene. But she does not recognize their angelic quality, nor does she take them to be body-snatchers.

It is essential that our translations respect the reluctance of the evangelists to describe the resurrection event. Matthew alone records a tradition of “what the soldiers saw” to counteract the only rational explanation of the body’s disappearance. The other Gospels concentrate on the statement that: “The stone has been rolled away, the women are frightened and meet someone they say has special clothing who gives them a message for the disciples.”

The evangelists’ concern not to use symbolic language when speaking of the risen Lord is even more evident in the other post-resurrection narratives. In the Lukan story of the walk to Emmaus, Jesus acts as an ordinary man. Something prevents the two disciples from recognizing him (François courant). When their eyes are opened and they recognize him, he is not there. But they do not speculate as to how he appears and disappears, neither does Luke speak of what happened to the broken bread. They identify their Master because their hearts burn while he opens the Scriptures to them.

Luke continues in this sober and psychological way of speaking about the risen Lord in the next story. While the disciples talk about it all, he himself stands in their midst. This time, they immediately notice the extraordinary presence and are full of terror. This reaction is quite natural and Luke makes it clear that the disciples interpret their experience in the category of ghostly apparitions (“a *pneuma*”). Jesus’ response, as told by Luke, is quite down-to-earth. He asks them straightforward questions (“why these doubts?”), challenges them to look at him carefully and to touch him. As they still don’t believe that he is their master of the week before, he eats in their presence and, in the end, “opens their minds to understand the Scriptures” so that they can interpret what is happening to them.

In these two Lukan narratives, the extraordinary is reduced to a minimum. In the first, it is Jesus’ sudden invisibility, in the second, his sudden appearance. The disciples’ actions are absolutely natural except for the passage from unbelief to faith which, in the two cases, is linked with the understanding of the Scriptures. In both stories, Jesus uses the word “Messiah”, but does not claim the title for himself. When, in the second pericope, Jesus identifies himself, he says: “it is me”, and does not use the divine title “Lord”. Finally, in his injunction to his disciples “to wait in Jerusalem until you receive the power from above”, that is “the promise of my Father”, Luke delicately introduces the “wholly other” into a discourse which otherwise is not “religious”.

We can find the same sobriety in John’s narratives. Mary Magdalene does not recognize Jesus until she hears him speaking to her. She calls him “Rabbi”

⁷ Matthew 28.7. C rating for the text omitting *apo tôn nekron*.

and he speaks of God as his Father and "his brothers' Father", his God and theirs. Later, his sudden appearance does not cause fear among the disciples and they rejoice. The centrality of faith is emphasized by Thomas' unbelief. John shows Jesus going out of his way to convince the doubter who touches the risen body and makes the final confession "My Lord and my God". But the purpose of this bodily experience is only to emphasize that it is not necessary for faith. John does not expect his readers to perceive the risen Christ with their senses, but to believe without seeing him.

This has important consequences for the translation of these texts. Church language, when speaking of the Easter event, has become more religious than the evangelists'. According to the Gospels, the "angels" use two common words to tell the woman what happened to Jesus which the Good News Bible translates as: "he has risen" and "on the third day he will rise". This is different from the French "revenu de la mort à la vie", and "qu'il revienne de la mort à la vie" (Luke 24.6-7) and from the German Gute Nachricht Bible: "Gott hat ihm vom Tod erweckt" (God has aroused him from death) whilst in the New Testament it was "er ist auferstanden". The Greek words *ēgerthē* and *anastēnai* stand for getting up, for instance, from sleep. They describe an ordinary bodily movement, are purely natural and could be translated in French by: "il s'est levé" and in German by: "er ist aufgestanden". The traditional English term "he is risen" has today become church language, like the German "er ist auferstanden".

My attempt at discovering how the writers of the Gospels use or do not use religious symbolism in communicating their religious experience has to end with the remark that Bible translators should give special attention to their own use of the religious language of their readers. The New Testament is about religion, but the very way it uses the symbols standing for spiritual reality which cannot be perceived by our senses is to be respected if the full impact of its message is to be experienced by the hearers of the Word.

SAVAS AGOURIDES

"LITTLE ONES" IN MATTHEW

The author is Professor of New Testament in the University of Athens, a vice-president of the United Bible Societies, and a translator of the New Testament into modern Greek.

There is a group of texts in Matthew which are difficult to translate satisfactorily. They are 18.1-14, 21.15f., and 10.40-42. The difficult phrases in them are *paidion toiouto* (traditionally translated "this little one"), *hena tōn mikrōn toutōn* ("one of these little ones"), and *paides* ("children"). The doubts arise from the vagueness of the Greek expressions as they were translated from the Aramaic; the short tradition of the parallel to Mt 18.1-14 which we find in Mark 9.33-37 and above all because the term *mikros*, outside these contexts, has the sense of an insignificant, humble member of the church, quite contrary to what these contexts imply.

The term *mikros* can take on several meanings, related to time, space, size, age, social position etc. Exegetes tend to relate the term to the social position of the persons concerned—though they never try to tell us how much humbler these people were, compared with the generally humble followers of Jesus. Yet