

SOME PROBLEMS OF EQUIVALENCE IN AMOS 1:3

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The following notes come out of the experience of interpreting the book of Amos, and then trying to find the best way to render the text into the kind of English which is the aim of Today's English Version. The conclusions are tentative, for the version is in process. The renderings suggested here for TEV are therefore subject to further change. The reader is invited to participate by sending comments to the editor of *The Bible Translator* or to the TEV Old Testament Committee of the American Bible Society.

Certain problems of equivalence in Amos 1:3 may perhaps be best seen by examining a rather literal rendering of the Hebrew text of this well-known verse:

Thus says the Lord, "Because of three transgressions of Damascus, and because of four, I will not revoke it, because of their threshing Gilead with sharp instruments of iron."

Let us focus attention on four problems:

1. What is the meaning of the idiom (repeated eight times in the first two chapters of Amos): "because of three transgressions . . . and because of four"? How should the sense then be rendered in "common" English?

There have been many suggestions as to the meaning of this idiom. One thing seems clear. The sense is not simply "because of three or four" (i.e. a few). Nor is the meaning to be understood in the literal sense of "three plus four" (i.e. seven), though one should perhaps not rule out completely the possibility that there is a symbolic meaning intended—the full or complete number. Most present-day students of the question conclude with Gesenius-Kautsch-Cowley (*Hebrew Grammar*, section 134 s) that the idiom means "an indefinite total". Some modern translations use this conclusion in their renderings, with the added assumption that here the reference is to a large number:

"For crime after crime . . ." (NEB)

"For outrage after outrage . . ." (Phillips).

Other translations (The Jerusalem Bible, New American Bible) keep closer to a traditional rendering, but explain the idiom in a marginal note. The TEV Old Testament committee, transforming the noun "transgressions" to a verbal kernel form, proposes to render the whole expression thus: "have sinned again and again".

2. What is the meaning and the best rendering of "I will not revoke it"? As to the meaning, there are two problems: First, what is the reference of "it"? In context, though there is no immediate specific referent, yet one may assume that in the mind of the speaker the reference is to some such idea as the punishment, (judicial) sentence or wrath of God. For in each case of the use of the formula in question there soon follows a word of judgement

specifying the punishment in store. Another possibility is adopted by the Translators' Translation of the Old Testament: "I will not turn back the invader." Here the Hebrew suffix is taken to refer to the "nation" or "enemy" which God sends (or allows) to punish the offending people.

Secondly, in order to get the meaning "revoke" for the Hebrew verb here, one must assume a rare and unusual meaning for it, found almost nowhere else in the Old Testament. (Apart from Amos, Brown-Driver-Briggs cites only Num. 23:20 and Esther 8:5, 8.) It is possible that one does not need to resort to this, in view of the fact that the word rendered "not" may have an emphatic and positive sense here, rather than the usual negative one (see D. N. Freedman, "The Burning Bush", *Biblica* 50 (1969), 245-6). Then the verb would mean "bring (punishment) back upon". The end result will be much the same in either case, but the latter possibility makes a more satisfactory basis for the proposed TEV rendering: "I will surely punish them."

3. How can one convey today the essential meaning of the culturally obscure "threshing Gilead with sharp instruments of iron"? The reference would seem to be to a practice that is certainly beyond the knowledge of most of the readers we have in mind. It can be explained in a commentary that the reference is probably to the cruel practice of requiring prisoners of war to lie down and then to run over them with threshing sledges spiked with iron. How can this be "worked into" a concise rendering that can be understood by the TEV reader? A further complication is that we are not sure whether Amos is referring to an historical event, an actual practice of the Syrian armies, in Gilead—or whether he is speaking metaphorically. In view of the double difficulty, the TEV O.T. committee is proposing a non-literal and non-metaphorical rendering: "they have treated the people of Gilead with terrible cruelty." Not so powerful as the original, but the essence of the crime, we believe.

4. "I will not revoke it" is the heart of the verse. It is framed by two expressions that give the reasons for God's determination to judge the culprits. But these reasons do not have the same force or function. How can this be expressed? The reason which precedes the statement of divine purpose would seem to give the background for the threat of judgement: rebellion against God has been expressed in repeated acts of violence, so ingrained as to be incurable. The reason that follows, on the other hand, is a heinous example: it is "the last straw". God's patience is finally exhausted.

In the proposed TEV rendering, the background of God's determination to judge is expressed by a sentence ending with a period. The causal relation with what follows is left implicit. But the explicit and final reason for God's decision to punish is expressed by a subordinate "because" clause.

The tentative TEV rendering of Amos 1:3 incorporating all these proposed solutions is:

The Lord says, "The people of Damascus have sinned again and again. I will surely punish them, because they have treated the people of Gilead with terrible cruelty."