

ELLINGWORTH: Did you limit yourself to common language, or have you used many specifically religious or ecclesiastical terms?

BIERWISCH: The language is based on the language of popular poetry, which includes some religious terms, and also some forms which are specially used in poetry: for example, *življenje* "living", for *život* "life", *oproštenje* for *aprostaj* "forgiveness" and so on. The constructions are not all those which an average peasant would use in normal conversation, but they are all constructions which he would understand.

ELLINGWORTH: What are the next steps you hope to take?

BIERWISCH: It would be nice to complete a translation of the Psalter, including psalms which I have found too difficult so far. Also, it would be good to find people to write tunes for them which are simple enough, not only for church choirs, but for the whole congregation. I am sure it can be done.

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## TRANSLATING THE QUESTIONS IN ISAIAH 50

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A striking feature of the literary style of Isaiah 50 is the use of rhetorical questions—that is, questions that are asked to make assertions, rather than to gain information. In this short chapter of eleven verses there are no less than ten questions, most, and possibly all, of them rhetorical. Such questions, when literally rendered, often give the reader trouble. He tends to read them as straight questions and so miss the point completely, or be puzzled by what is said.

In what follows, each of the questions in Isaiah 50 will be presented first in the rather literal rendering of the RSV. Then, following discussion of some of the problems involved, the rendering which is proposed for *Today's English Version* will be given. Since TEV is still being prepared for publication, the renderings presented here are all subject to further revision. Reader response to them is invited and welcome!

The first half of Isa. 50:1 reads in the RSV:

Thus says the Lord:  
 "Where is your mother's bill of divorce,  
 with which I put her away?  
 Or which of my creditors is it  
 to whom I have sold you?"

Many readers will take this to mean that the Lord really wants to know the whereabouts of the bill of divorce, and the identity of the creditors!

To understand the real meaning of these questions, one must not only realize that they are rhetorical, but must understand the figures of speech used in them, and something of the situation in which they are used. For this the comment on the passage that we find in *The Interpreter's Bible* is helpful: "Second Isaiah describes the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his

people as a marriage . . . and is concerned with the breach of the bond and its consequences. The two questions contain two figures for Israel's present situation: divorce of the wife and selling of the children into slavery. Israel complains that she has been divorced [by the Lord], and that her people have been sold."

When one reads the rest of the verse, it becomes clear that Israel has indeed been "put away" and her people "sold"—they went into captivity. But this did not happen on the initiative of an unreasonable and arbitrary God; it was because of the people's sin. So the intent of the questions is something like this: "I wrote no bill of divorce, nor have I any creditors whose demands I met by selling you into slavery. These are not the real reasons for the separation that has taken place between you and me, and for my sending you into captivity." The rhetorical questions are a vivid way of denying the implied complaint of God's people that he was mainly responsible for their plight.

Combining these insights, and keeping the question form because it is more forceful, and more clearly implies the complaint of Israel, we rephrase the questions as follows for TEV:

"What makes you think I sent my people away  
like a man who divorces his wife?  
Or that I made you go away captive  
like a debtor who sells his children as slaves?"

In the first two lines of 50:2 we have the following questions:

"Why, when I came, was there no man?  
When I called, was there no one to answer?" (RSV)

Although it is not the only possible interpretation,<sup>1</sup> most interpreters<sup>2</sup> find in these words a reference to the Lord's coming and calling his people through the prophet. The questions are rhetorical, and express God's disappointment over the lack of response which he has found to his prophet's words. The last half of the verse, with its witness to the power of God to save, gives support to this interpretation. The proposed TEV rendering simplifies the construction, but does not make explicit the situation described above:

"Why was no one there when I came to you?  
Why did no one answer when I called?"

In the third and fourth lines of 50:2 we find two more questions:

"Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?  
Or have I no power to deliver?" (RSV)

Here the rhetorical nature of the questions and their intent seem clear, even in a literal rendering. The implied answer is "No, your hand is not shortened; and yes, you do have power to deliver." The questions could be translated as assertions: "My hand is not shortened, so that it cannot redeem, and I have power to deliver." This, however, not only lacks the force of the question

<sup>1</sup> For an interpretation other than the one followed here, see Claus Westermann, *Isaiah* 40-66 (Old Testament Library).

<sup>2</sup> For example: The Interpreter's Bible, The Anchor Bible, C. R. North in *The Second Isaiah*.

form, but does not so clearly convey another component of meaning implied by the questions: namely, Israel has doubts about God's power.

It is therefore better to keep the questions, modifying the wording to make them more clear. In particular, the word "shortened" really has the sense here of "powerless, ineffectual" (so *Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon*). Further, "redeem" is a rather high-level word for TEV. So we may recast in these terms:

"Is my hand too weak to save you?  
Have I no power to rescue you?"

In 50:8 there are two rhetorical questions put by the servant of the Lord. Each is coupled with an invitation or challenge to the speaker's opponent or accuser to appear in court and make his case:

Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand up together.  
Who is my adversary?  
Let him come near to me. (RSV)

The context makes it clear that the speaker is confident that God will acquit him (first line of 50:8). So the questions and the statements coupled with them are really a way of saying "If anyone wants to accuse me, let him do so—I am not afraid." This seems fairly clear even in the more literal translation of the RSV. In this case, TEV again retains the questions, but modifies the wording to bring out more clearly the judicial setting and language of the lines:

Will someone bring charges against me?  
Let us go to court together!  
Will someone accuse me in court?  
Let him come with his accusation!

In 50:9 the situation is much the same as in verse 8:

Behold, the Lord helps me;  
who will declare me guilty? (RSV)

One may note that the thought here is closely similar to what we find in Romans 8:31-34. With God to defend one, one need not fear what any accuser may do. We need only change the wording slightly: 1) using "defends me" rather than "helps me", to make the legal setting more evident; 2) using "can" rather than "will", to imply the sure failure of the speaker's accusers; 3) using "then" to underscore the basis of the speaker's confidence, pointing as it does to "the Lord helps me". Thus in TEV we read:

The Lord himself defends me—  
who, then, can accuse me of wrong?

The implied answer, of course, is "No one!" Yet, if anyone is bold enough to try, he "will wear out like old clothing . . . vanish like moth-eaten cloth!" (50:9b)

The final question in the chapter is difficult to interpret. Once again, as in verses 1-3, the Lord is the speaker. But the Hebrew is ambiguous and lends itself to various renderings. The RSV and the American Translation represent the two most likely possibilities. Let us look first at the RSV:

Who among you fears the Lord  
and obeys the voice of his servant,  
    who walks in darkness  
    and has no light,  
yet trusts in the name of the Lord  
and relies upon his God?

The meaning of this rather literal rendering is not completely clear. It could mean in effect "I hope there is someone among you who fears the Lord, and obeys the voice of his servant, etc." But more probably it is meant to be taken as a rhetorical question with the implied answer, "No one." In this case, the question is addressed to the rebellious among the people of Israel, the same ones who are addressed in verse 11 (so *The Interpreter's Bible*, C. C. Torrey in *The Second Isaiah*, and NAB).

The more commonly held interpretation of this verse, however, is represented by the American Translation:

Whoever among you fears the Lord,  
and listens to the voice of his servant—  
    Though he walk in darkness,  
    without a gleam of light,  
Let him trust in the name of the Lord,  
and rely on his God!

According to this interpretation, the words are addressed to the faithful in Israel, in contrast to the unfaithful, who are addressed in verse 11. The question form is kept by other translations that follow the same basic interpretation (ASV, Jewish Publication Society, *The Living Bible*, *The Anchor Bible*, *Old Testament Library*), but the meaning is the same. "Who among you fears the Lord . . .?" really means "Anyone among you that fears the Lord." This is then followed by a word of encouragement: "Though he walk in darkness . . . let him trust in the name of the Lord."

The TEV rendering here follows the interpretation of the greater number of modern interpreters, even though this does not necessarily guarantee its correctness:

Any of you that fear the Lord  
and obey the words of his servant,  
though the path you walk is dark indeed,  
trust in the Lord, rely on your God.

In this case the question form is abandoned for a statement that is unambiguous. In addition, there is some telescoping so that the reader will not find the sentence too long and hard to retain by the time he reaches the climax.