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KINGS ARE LIONS, BUT HEROD IS A FOX:

Translating the metaphor in Luke 13.32

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In the context of Luke 13.31-33, some Pharisees warned Jesus to leave Jerusalem and go somewhere else because, they said, King Herod wanted to kill him. In reply, Jesus gave them a message to convey to "that fox" (verse 32). In this article I want to consider firstly what Jesus meant when he used the metaphor "that fox". After that I will discuss various methods which have been suggested for the translation of metaphor, and show how they may be applied in the case of this metaphor.

Understanding the metaphor

In seeking to understand what Jesus said, the critical question for the translator is what idea he conveyed to his hearers by his use of the metaphor "Herod is a fox". In particular, what was the point of similarity which Jesus was drawing between a fox and Herod?

In *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Luke* Reiling and Swellengrebel say the similarity is "crafty, or, cunning man" (page 517). Referring to this interpretation, Jacob Loewen, a former United Bible Societies' translation consultant, says, "The basis for calling Herod a fox comes from a supplementary component, which in European languages means sly, cunning, or cheating. In fact, most readers of the New Testament will assume that Jesus called Herod a sly, cheating individual, when in actual fact this is probably not the supplementary component on the basis of which Jesus used the word. The Bible speaks of foxes as being destructive, and many commentators feel that the real supplementary component here is destructiveness" (page 56). From an accompanying diagram, "destructive" is the point of similarity Loewen favours, yet he says that a German translation (probably that by Jørg Zink in 1965) is the only one he is aware of which has what could be translated into English as "Go tell that fox, that destroyer".

Beekman and Callow (page 129) give a different list of the characteristics of a fox from those given by Loewen and identify "sly" as the point of similarity, although they admit in parentheses that "It is assumed here that the point of similarity is 'slyness'. This is not overtly stated in the metaphor." McArthur, commenting on the mistranslation

of this verse in the Aguacatec language of Guatemala, says, "The helps we had at that time told us that the point of comparison was that Herod was a cheater. We have since come to understand from the use of the word 'fox' in many other Biblical passages that Jesus was calling him a small or inconsequential man". He then adds, "a better rendering would be 'go tell that poor benighted soul ...'" (page 16).

Geldenhuis (pages 382, 384) comments, "He bids them tell Herod, that fox (a cunning but weak ruler)". In a footnote to his comment he quotes T W Manson, who says:

"'Fox' in Jewish use has a double sense. It typifies low cunning as opposed to straightforward dealing, and is used in contrast to 'lion' to describe an insignificant third-rate person as opposed to a person of real power and greatness. To call Herod 'that fox' is as much to say he is neither a great man nor a straight man; he has neither majesty nor honour."

The fact that different commentators understand the metaphor of the "fox" referring to King Herod differently, highlights the problem that translators face. It is all too easy to focus on a point of similarity which is chosen on the basis of our own cultural and language background, rather than seeking to discover what the hearers in the original language may have understood from the metaphor.

The metaphor of the "fox" is interesting, because it was spoken by Jesus, probably in Aramaic and from his Jewish background, but it is recorded by Luke in Greek. The fox in the *Greek Fables of Aesop* is a sly, cunning character and this is how the concept is used in metaphors in Western languages such as English. It appears, however, that the Hebrew use of "fox" as a metaphor is more usually in line with the explanation given by Manson above, and "used in contrast to 'lion' to describe an insignificant third-rate person as opposed to a person of real power and greatness." Hope (see list of references) points out that the Hebrew word *shu'al* and the Greek equivalent *alōpēx* can refer either to any of the three types of foxes or to the jackal found in Palestine, and notes that "In ancient Arabic literature, and the Talmud and Midrash the word 'lion' stands for a truly great and powerful person. In contrast, 'jackal' is used to designate an insignificant but self-important person. Since this figurative usage of 'lion' (or 'lioness') is also common in the Bible, there is a strong probability that the term 'jackal' or 'fox' used as a metaphor in the Bible for a person carries the connotation of self-important insignificance."

According to Buth (pages 7-8) Hebrew culture shared with the rest of ancient Mediterranean cultures the understanding of the fox as a crafty animal. He gives an example from the Midrash with a comment on Song of Songs 2.15 "Catch for us the foxes", in which Rabbi Eleazar ben Shim'on at the end of the 2nd century AD said, "The Egyptians were crafty and that is why Scripture compares them to foxes." However, Buth goes on to give a second common use of "fox" in Hebrew and says, "Lions and foxes can be contrasted with each other to represent the difference between great men and inferior men." He lists a number of interesting references in support of this, among which are the following:

Of a certain scholar, thought at first to be brilliant, but who by all outward signs was inept, it was said: "The lion you mentioned turns out to be a [mere] fox."

Sometimes the use of "fox" is related to pedigree. "He is a lion the son of a lion, but you are a lion the son of a fox," means that he is a distinguished scholar whose father is one too, while you are a distinguished scholar whose father is less distinguished.

The term "fox" can also have a moral sense, as is demonstrated in the saying from the Mishnah, "Be a tail to lions rather than a head to foxes." In other words, "It is better to be someone of low rank among those who are morally and spiritually your superior, than someone of high rank among scoundrels."

The phrase "And infants shall rule over them" from the list of curses in Isaiah 3.1-7 to be visited upon Jerusalem and Judah, is interpreted by the Babylonian Talmud as follows: "[Infants means] foxes, sons of foxes." In this interpretation, "fox" not only assumes the sense of moral depravity, but also through the verb "rule" is linked to kingly reign. Thus, "foxes, sons of foxes" refers to "worthless, degenerate rulers who are descendants of worthless, degenerate rulers."

From this, Both concludes that Jesus did not intend his hearers to understand that Herod was sly, when he responded to the report that Herod wanted to kill him. Rather, he was commenting on Herod's ineptitude or inability to carry out his threat. Jesus questioned Herod's pedigree, moral stature, and leadership, cutting him down to size and putting him in his place.

This conclusion is in line with the understanding of metaphor known as **conceptual metaphor theory**, where the metaphor "Herod is a Fox" is seen as an extension of a more basic metaphor, "People are Animals". In the Old Testament there is another extension of the basic metaphor "People are Animals", namely "The King is a Lion" (see, for example, 2 Sam 17.10; Prov 19.12; 20.2; 28.15), showing that this is a recognized metaphor in biblical Hebrew. It is therefore very likely that when Jesus referred to Herod as "that fox", those he was speaking to would have the usual basic metaphor for a king in mind, and would immediately recognise that by using the metaphor "Herod (The King) is a Fox", Jesus intended to convey that Herod was in extreme contrast to someone who conformed to their normal concept of a king, "The King is a Lion".

Direct word for word translation

In the past, many people who translated the Bible by methods of formal equivalence translated metaphors word for word from the biblical language into the language of their people. They did so believing that the metaphor in their language would automatically convey the same meaning as the metaphor in the biblical language. However, Beekman and Callow (page 143) warn that a metaphor may only have a certain meaning in one particular language; and because of this, a metaphor

translated word for word from one language to another may convey no meaning, or a wrong meaning, in the second language.

The metaphor in Luke 13.32 is obviously a case in point for many languages, including European languages. As we have seen above there is no guarantee that readers or hearers of the metaphor "Herod is a fox" will be able to recognize the intended point of similarity or the right topic. This means, therefore, that a word for word translation will not be appropriate because it will not carry the correct sense in most cases. It is therefore quite surprising to observe that practically all translations in present day use in English, including such recent versions as NIV, TEV, CEV, and NLT, translate this metaphor literally, "Go (and) tell that fox".

Reducing metaphor to non-figurative language

As another way of dealing with metaphor, the translator may give the meaning of the biblical metaphor in a non-figurative form. Within this possibility, translators may choose to retain the image used in the original, or they may not (Beekman & Callow, page 148).

The discussion above of what the metaphor in Luke 13.32 means suggests some possible ways of expressing "that fox" in non-figurative language. For example, translators may consider saying something like "that worthless degenerate ruler" or "that self-important nobody". For similar expressions retaining the image of the original, see the next section, "Combining metaphor with other language structures".

There is a question with this approach, however, as to whether metaphor can really be reduced to literal usage. While it is possible to paraphrase metaphor, this cannot be done without some loss. It is claimed, for example, that reducing "tell that fox" to "tell that worthless ruler" loses at least some of the force contained in the range of meaning of the original metaphor, while at the same time replacing an expression that is full of interest for the hearer with something that is much plainer.

Of course most Bible translators are aware of the problems they face in having to reduce certain metaphors in the biblical language to non-figurative language in the translation. For this reason, they have sometimes been advised to try to restore the balance by translating an equal amount of non-figurative language in the biblical text into metaphor in the translated text. However, such advice would seem to regard metaphor as functioning mainly as a decorative rhetorical device. So, just as it is possible to replace a picture on a wall with another picture in a different position, so it is possible to replace a metaphor in one position in the text with a totally different metaphor in another position in the text and maintain the same effect or balance. However, metaphor is often used because it is the most precise way in which the author can express what he or she wants to say, and not only for rhetorical effect. Hence reducing the author's metaphor to literal paraphrase in one part of the text, and then introducing a different metaphor in another part of the text where the original author did not choose to use a metaphor, rather than restoring balance, will surely produce a different emphasis overall from what the author intended.

Combining metaphor with other language structures

A metaphor may also be rendered by combining it with a non-figurative form of language, or even with another metaphor or simile (Beekman & Callow, page 149). In Matthew 3.10, for example, judgment which is about to fall on people is pictured as an axe being laid at the root of trees, ready to chop down the fruitless ones. The sense of this could be stated first as a metaphor, "you are trees that do not bear fruit", or a simile "you are like trees that do not bear fruit", followed by the original "axe" metaphor.

Using this method in the translation of Luke 13.32, it may be possible to use the original metaphor together with a qualifying term; for example, "Go and tell that insignificant fox" or "... that mean king who is as weak as a fox".

Changing metaphor to simile

In discussing the translation of metaphor, people have often claimed that one of the simplest adjustments that can be made is to translate the metaphor in the form of a simile, thus making it clear that a comparison is intended. If the translator believes that the comparison itself is not clear, the point of similarity may be added, so that the simile will include the topic, the image and the point of similarity. In 1951, in answer to the question, "Can we substitute similes for metaphors?" Eugene Nida replied, "The answer to this question is a hearty 'Yes'. The substitution of similes for metaphors is often the best solution to an otherwise hopeless predicament" (page 95).

In the case of Luke 13.32, for most languages any rendering of the metaphor will need to contain some indication of the point of similarity, for reasons such as those given above. Translators may say, for example, "That ruler is as worthless as a fox! Go and tell him: ..."

Replacing a metaphor in the original with a similar metaphor in the language of the translation

Another approach that is sometimes considered is to replace the biblical metaphor with a metaphor of similar meaning from the language of the translation, that is, a (different) metaphor which will bring to the reader or hearer's mind the sense intended by the original metaphor (Larsen, pages 253- 4).

When the New Testament was translated into Swati, for example, it seems that the translators were influenced by the European explanation of the "fox" metaphor in the commentaries as referring to someone who is sly and cunning. They therefore substituted another animal metaphor, "snake", and translated *Hambani nitjele leyo nyoka, nitsi*: ... "Go and tell that snake, saying: ..." This change, however, rather than bringing out what was intended in the original utterance, made it suggest even more strongly that Jesus was calling Herod a twisty schemer than is indicated when "fox" is used as a metaphor in English. What happened in this case, then, was that replacing a metaphor from the original language with a different metaphor from the second language resulted in readers

and hearers having different thoughts and ideas than were intended by the original author.

On the other hand, in Zulu and other African languages *impungushe* ("the jackal") is also seen as an insignificant animal; and referring metaphorically to a king as *impungushe* instead of as *iSilo* or *iNkonyama* ("the lion") the normal praise-names of a paramount chief, has the same effect which Manson suggests was intended by Jesus. It is interesting to note that, in revising the New Testament translation for publication in the first complete Bible in Swati (1997), the translators also decided to use the "jackal" metaphor in place of the "snake" metaphor they had used previously, and to translate *Hambani nitjele leyo mphungutja, nitsi*: ... "Go and tell that jackal, saying: ..."

In English, however, the use of the word "fox" by itself not only suggests a false meaning—that Herod is clever, crafty, cunning, and sly—but it also misses the humiliating and scornful rebuke which the metaphor conveyed in the original context. In his article on this passage, Both gives a number of other possible terms and expressions which convey something of the sense in English, including metaphors such as: "small-fry", "clown", "creampuff", "nobody", "weasel", "jackass", "tin soldier". But he warns that most of these are too colloquial or funny, and that the metaphor chosen must be understood correctly by a wide audience. Of the terms Both suggests, it may be possible to retain what Jesus intended and the basic "People are Animals" metaphor by using an expression such as "that jackass Herod", or the one he uses in the title of his article, "that small-fry Herod". This expression calls to mind another extension of the basic "People are Animals" metaphor, namely "People are Fish", since "fry" is a term for small fish in English. We note, however, that no major version of the Bible in English substitutes another metaphor for "fox" in this passage.

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