As for translation, whether it is advisable, for example in Numbers 9.1, to put "first month", "month of Nisan", or (for Nuer) *Duong*, is left to the translators and their consultant to decide. Putting *Duong* would be the equivalent of putting "March" in an English translation (or March/April) and this might convey the wrong cultural message. In some cases, the solution sometimes adopted by GNB of putting both the Hebrew number (first month) and the Babylonian name (Nisan) can be followed; see, for example, Esther 3.7. But that will still leave readers in the dark about what time of the year we are talking about, or what the weather conditions would have been at that time. In such cases, only footnotes can shed some light. This would apply equally well to a text like John 10.23, where we read that it was winter, and that Jesus was walking (up and down to keep warm, perhaps?) in Solomon's Porch in the Temple. This, the GNB study Bible says, was a sheltered colonnade on the east side of the temple, where, presumably, Jesus would have been out of the cold wind blowing from the West.

Like all helps that are provided with a Bible, it is up to the reader to profit from them – if he or she is interested to learn more. Persons who are not interested will not be bothered by the extra notes or appendices that come with their Bible. However, those who are keen on learning more, when they are preparing sermons, for example, or simply when trying to understand what they read, will be happy to find information readily available, information which they may not be able to find easily anywhere else.

NOTES

Translating the vision of Amos 7.7-8

In the third vision in Amos 7, verses 7-8, the prophet sees the Lord standing on or by a wall with something in his hand which he identifies as *'anak*. Traditionally this item has been translated as "plumb-line", or as "plummet" (or "plumb-bob" which means the same). In either case the reference is to a weight on the end of a line, with which a builder checks to see whether or not the wall he is building is perpendicular.

The Hebrew word *'anak* occurs four times in these two verses in the Bible, but it is found nowhere else. The Hebrew lexicons most commonly used by Bible translators give the meaning as "plummet", and suggest the word in related languages refers to both "lead" and "tin". Most commentators assume that the weight of the plumb-line is made of lead, and that the meaning "plummet" is derived from a metaphor in which a thing is called by the name of the material from which it is made.

Certain scholars, however, have studied words in related languages, and they state that *'anak* is derived from an Akkadian or Assyrian word *anaku*. They also believe they have proved conclusively that this word referred exclusively to "tin" and not to "lead". They conclude therefore that the word cannot refer to a plumb-line, and consequently that the

traditional translation and interpretation of the passage is no longer acceptable.

It is important to consider how to translate *'anak*, because two UBS publications that translators use to determine the best Hebrew text and how to translate it give conflicting advice. On the one hand, De Waard and Smalley, in the UBS *Translator's Handbook on the Book of Amos* go into the question briefly and conclude, "The translation is not fully certain, but no other suggestion is as good" (pages 147–148, 255–256). On the other hand, The Preliminary and Interim Report on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project (HOTTP), volume 5, favors the other interpretation, and remarks, "The expression 'tin' must have had for Amos and his contemporaries a particular symbolic or metaphorical meaning which we do no longer understand" (page 292). Most translations still follow the traditional rendering. However, the advice of HOTTP has been followed by the Dutch *Groot Nieuws Bijbel* (1983), without footnote, and the French *TOB* (1993), with a footnote giving the traditional explanation.

Evidence and arguments

In a much quoted article in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* in 1965 (volume 24, pages 285–296), Landsberger summarises the evidence to prove that tin was in use by the Babylonians and Assyrians and that the Assyrian or Akkadian word *abaru* means "lead" and *anaku* means "tin". That evidence is quite convincing. Then in 1970, Holladay wrote a short article repeating and supporting Landsberger's position after two important OT reference works (the Koehler-Baumgartner lexicon, third edition, and Wolff's *Commentary on Amos*) were published in which the traditional rendering "plumb-line" for *'anak* was given.

I have no reason to question the evidence for the connection of the Hebrew *'anak* with the Assyrian or Akkadian word *anaku*. But I think we still need to consider what this means for understanding the use of the word in Amos. It is important to note here that biblical Hebrew has its own words for both "lead" (*'ofereth*) and "tin" (*bedil*). These words are found together in verses such as Numbers 31.22 and Ezekiel 22.18-20; 27.12. When a word with a similar meaning to one existing in a language is borrowed from another language, it usually does not have exactly the same meaning, but conveys some additional or special meaning. There is also often some degree of metaphor involved in the meaning conveyed when it is used in its adopted language. So it does not follow that if we can determine the meaning of the word in Assyrian and Akkadian, this means that we have also determined the meaning of the borrowed word in Hebrew.

Landsberger and Holladay claim that the Akkadian word *anaku* means "tin" and nothing else. However, although Landsberger applies his findings to reject the translation "plumb-line" in Amos 7, he does not suggest any Assyrian, Akkadian or Hebrew word which means "plumb-line". In fact he even states that he was "unable to judge whether this tool of masonry was known in antiquity"! But there is ample evidence

from Ancient Near Eastern art that such a tool was used; and we might have expected that he would at least have checked up on this before stating that the traditional translation of Amos 7.7-8 is impossible.

There is another word in Biblical Hebrew, *mishqoleth*, which has been translated "plummet" and "plumb-line" in English translations (2 Kgs 21.13; Isa 28.17). The exact form of this instrument is unclear, since both the Brown, Driver and Briggs lexicon (pages 1053–1054) and the Koehler-Baumgartner lexicon (page 581) define it as "a leveling instrument" (for horizontal accuracy), whereas a plumb-line checks whether a structure is perpendicular, that is, it checks vertical accuracy. However, as the word is derived from the root *shakal* ("weigh") it would appear that the instrument was a weighted plumb-line, rather than something like a spirit level; and it would therefore check vertical and not horizontal accuracy.

The main argument against the translation of *'anak* as "plumb-line" seems to be based on the belief that the weight on a plumb-line is always made of lead. But this is not necessarily so. The one I inherited from my grandfather is made of iron, and modern plumb-bobs are mostly made of metals such as brass or steel. It is quite possible that builders in the Ancient Near East could have used other metals too; and although tin is considerably lighter than lead, it is possible that in some cases this metal was used to form the weight on a plumb-line. There may even be an indication of this in the literal translation in Zechariah 4.10 of *ha'eben habedil* ("the stone of tin") which has also been translated "plumb-line" and "plummet".

S.M. Paul (*A Commentary on the Book of Amos*) is one commentator who favors the translation "tin"; he says, "Thus the usual meaning 'plumb-line', which is set against the wall to measure its straightness, must now be discarded." He takes the meaning of the Hebrew *homath 'anak* to be literally "wall of tin", and points out that when walls of metal are mentioned in Ancient Near Eastern texts, they occasionally have a metaphorical or symbolical sense. He gives examples from Egyptian texts where Pharaoh Seti 1 is described as a "wall of bronze for Egypt with crenellations of flint" and "a great wall of copper" which protects his troops. His son, Rameses 2, describes himself as "your wall of iron". In an Akkadian text from El Amarna, Abimilki of Tyre addresses Pharaoh as "a wall of bronze erected for me". In the OT Jeremiah is promised that he will be unassailable against the attacks of the people, because God is making him "a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and bronze walls" (Jer 1.18; 15.20), and in Ezekiel 4.3 the image of "an iron wall" is used.

Paul concludes that if walls of iron and bronze symbolise strong, fortified walls, a tin wall would be the exact opposite, since the metal is a symbol of softness, uselessness, and perishability, as Landsberger points out. Therefore in this metaphor, Israel is pictured as being extremely weak, defenceless, and on the point of being demolished. He says the probability still very likely exists that there is more in this vision than meets the eye. He therefore concludes that it is thus no wonder that the prophet remains baffled by its symbolism, as do those who try to interpret his message. What Paul fails to mention is that, although walls

of iron and bronze are recorded, as far as we know there is no mention of tin walls anywhere else in the Ancient Near East.

The problem of how to interpret the rest of verse 7 and 8 with "wall of tin" in mind remains. Although it is a possibility, it is not clear why God would set up such a wall in the midst of his people, and how this act, according to Paul "apparently refers here symbolically to the execution of judgement" (page 235). It would be much more likely that the people would be said to be setting up such a weak line of defence for themselves against the inevitable punishment of God.

Another interpretation of "wall of tin" has been given by the commentator Brunet. Brunet sees "Yahweh standing (almost 'standing guard') over a wall of tin, and with tin in his hand (and the word for 'tin' is an Assyrian word!) – if Yahweh is able to commandeer such an immense amount of that strategic metal for manufacturing bronze weaponry against Israel, then Israel is lost indeed." What he fails to mention, however, is that although tin is essential for producing bronze, so is brass, and there is no mention of that metal. In fact Landsberger makes the point that tin is useless unless it is alloyed with another metal. There is also no explanation of how this interpretation fits in with verse 8.

With the variety of interpretations from those who favor translating *'anak* as "tin", it is no wonder that HOTTP says, "The expression 'tin' must have had for Amos and his contemporaries a particular symbolic or metaphorical meaning which we do no longer understand" (page 292). However, it is important for translators to be able to make sense of the source text for themselves if they are going to have any success in producing a translation which makes sense to their readers.

A further argument against the traditional rendering of *'anak* as "plumb-line" is based on what are seen as constructions that are impossible in Hebrew. Firstly, Landsberger says the expression *homath 'anak* "a plumb-line wall" is impossible. Therefore he and others suggest that it is necessary to change the Hebrew text as if the word *'anak* had been copied by mistake. They propose either deleting *'anak* or changing it to *'eben* ("stone"). The Lord is then seen to be standing either beside a wall or beside a stone wall. Holladay says it is better to find an interpretation which takes the text as it is: for him this means finding a meaning for *'anak* which will make sense when translated literally. These commentators apparently do not consider the possibility of taking *'anak* as metaphor, and translating "a wall built with the help of a plumb-line" (TEV) or "a wall that had been built true to plumb" (NIV). Landsberger says that "to set a plumb-line in the midst of my people" is also an impossibility, but he does not say why.

We cannot escape the fact that *'anak* is used metaphorically in these verses, no matter how it is translated. Metaphor often results from structures that are seemingly impossible; and it is more difficult than usual to judge whether a structure is impossible or not when it contains a word which occurs only once in the Bible, as is the case here. The traditional interpretation can be maintained whether we think that the

first *'anak* is was inserted in error or not. In this case whether the Lord is standing alongside a wall, or a wall that is true to plumb, the fact that he has a plumb-line in his hand carries the same sense – that he is engaged in checking its vertical straightness.

The metaphor describing a nation as a building is common in the Bible and is found, for example, in Amos 9.9. Therefore setting a plumb-line in the midst of the people makes perfect sense metaphorically, as God showing that he is about to test his people and to destroy them when they are no longer straight according to his standards. A similar metaphor is found in 2 Kings 21.13 and Isaiah 28.17, where the instruments for testing are a measuring line and a leveling instrument. Because of its apparent derivation, *mishqoleth* seems to be the usual Hebrew word for "plumb-line", as it is translated in English, although the lexicons define it differently. If this is so, then the fact that Amos uses *'anak*, with its apparent Assyrian origin, in place of *mishqoleth* suggests that the metaphor carries the extra element that God will use Assyria to execute his judgement.

Conclusion

Traditionally *'anak* has been translated "plumb-line" in Amos 7.7-8. Although it seems likely that this word is derived from the Assyrian word anaku which has been shown to mean "tin", it does not follow that the Hebrew derivative also means "tin" and nothing else. Related languages often derive words from one another, but almost always to fill the need for a new concept or to convey some specialized meaning. Hebrew has a word for "tin", so it is likely that the word *'anak*, used only in this passage, and in a vision, carries a specialized meaning. Traditionally this meaning has been understood to be "plumb-line". There is no evidence that the weight of this instrument was necessarily made of lead and no other metal, so it is quite possible that some were made of tin.

Whereas the translation "plumb-line" makes perfect sense as a metaphor in this passage, there seems to be little agreement as to what the metaphor conveys among those who believe that the translation "plumb-line" is no longer acceptable and must be discarded in favor of "tin". The best solution, therefore, seems to be to follow the advice of the Translator's Handbook over that of HOTTP and to translate *'anak* as "plumb line". This is particularly so in new translations in languages which already have a Bible. Making a radical change from "plumb-line" to "tin" where the traditional interpretation is not only a distinct possibility, but is also familiar to readers, would in all likelihood lead to many readers, and particularly conservative readers, rejecting that translation.

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