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## SOME FEATURES OF GOOD TRANSLATION FOR CHILDREN

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*(The following is an extract from a paper presented recently by Dr Newman, from the perspective of his work in producing translations of the Bible for "early youth" in the USA.*

*—Editor)*

### Accuracy

In translating for Early Youth, we do not have the option of altering the biblical text. But at the same time we must be as conscious of the setting of our intended audience as Luke was of his. Somehow we must enter into the world of the child who will read the texts and attempt to speak the truth within that framework. But no matter how miserably we may fail in any other aspect of our task, we must above all else be faithful to the meaning of the original.

Since we translators are not experts in matters of Old Testament and New Testament textual criticism, we have decided to follow the scholarly opinions of the UBS Committees on the Greek and Hebrew texts. We have found this to be a very satisfactory arrangement, which saves us much time. On the assumption that these scholars have done their homework, we gratefully and eagerly devour the fruits of their endeavors. And we would highly recommend this procedure for other committees!

Alternative readings and renderings are included at relevant places. For example, Luke 8.43 is accompanied by a note which informs the readers that some ancient manuscripts do not have the words, "She had spent everything she had on doctors." At Luke 9.55 they learn that some ancient manuscripts add, "and said, 'Don't you know what Spirit you belong to? The Son of Man did not come to destroy people's lives, but to save them.'" Following the phrase "the Holy Spirit" at Luke 10.21 is the note, "Some ancient manuscripts have 'his spirit'."

Alternative renderings are given at Luke 2.49 ("in my Father's house": The Greek may also mean "doing my Father's work") and Luke 12.25 ("live longer": or "grow taller").

In order to promote a more accurate understanding among our readers, cultural and historical notes are also provided. During one of our testing sessions with children, the matter of "swaddling cloths" was discussed, and neither "pieces of cloth" nor "strips of cloth" seemed a satisfactory solution. Finally, "dressed him in baby clothes" was decided upon, but to be followed by a note: "In Greek this means 'wrapped him

in wide strips of cloth', which is how young babies were dressed." And at Luke 17.32 "what happened to Lot's wife" is clarified in a note: "Lot's wife turned to salt when she disobeyed God."

### Clarity

Wherever the original text is understood, that meaning should be made as clear as possible for the readers. In particular, all obvious (and subtle!) pronominal ambiguities should be avoided, and a naturalness of expression (suitable to the context) should be a primary consideration. Notice, for example, that in the following rendering of Luke 23.40-41, not only is a pronoun used ambiguously, but the condemned man speaks with the detachment of an unconcerned philosopher in a classroom at two o'clock in the afternoon: "Don't you fear God? You received the same sentence he did. Ours, however, is only right, because we are getting what we deserve for what we did; but he has done no wrong." In the translation for Early Youth the ambiguity is avoided, and an attempt is made to capture the emotion of the situation in which these words of desperation were spoken: "Don't you fear God? Aren't you getting the same punishment as this man? We got what was coming to us, but this man did nothing wrong."

Even section headings have to be treated with caution in order to avoid ambiguity. At Luke 7.11 "Jesus Raises a Widow's Son" has been shortened to "A Widow's Son", while "Jesus Calls Levi" (Luke 5.27) now reads "Jesus Chooses Levi". Although the verbs "raise" and "call" are simple enough, their associative meanings differ significantly from what is intended in the biblical setting. The same is true of a passage such as Luke 6.1, where many children understand "rubbing them (grains of wheat) in their hands" to imply cleaning the wheat before it is eaten. And so for children we have translated it as "They rubbed the husks off with their hands and started eating the grain."

Words which have a literal meaning, but are used metaphorically, must also be avoided in translation. "A teacher of the Law came up and tried to trap Jesus" (Luke 10.25; see also 11.16) will inevitably be understood of a physical, not verbal, trap. Moreover, the danger of misunderstanding is very much greater when the imagery is linked with other expressions. For example, in Luke 11.54 "trying to lay traps for him and catch him saying something wrong" will be understood as two separate actions, rather than as one event explained by another.

If you have ever listened to young children read, you will have noticed that generally very little weight is given to commas and periods. (Semicolons are different, for when they see these, they stop and stare!) Thus the translator should be extremely cautious about the way in which clauses and sentences are joined and how one sentence ends and the next begins. Consider the following from the parable of the Lost Son: (a) "In the meanwhile the older son was out in the field. On his way back . . ."

(b) “. . . and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he got him back safe and sound.” (c) “But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead . . .” For an educated adult reader looking at an open text, these may not offer insurmountable difficulties. But for oral reading either to or by a child, we should guard against such awkwardness.

### **Acceptability**

A translation may be clear, but still entirely unsatisfactory, if it does not appeal to the reader. And for children the matter of motivation is of vital importance, especially in a society where sophisticated television programs and well-illustrated books are targeted for a child audience. How can a translation that sounds like “Dick and Jane” possibly compete with “Sesame Street” or with Dr Seuss’ “Cat in the Hat”?

Attention to style is no less important for a children’s translation than for a standard translation. In fact, stylistic concerns probably demand an even higher priority in texts prepared for children, since through these we must appeal not only to children, but also to those adults who will purchase these translations for the use of their children. If something is well translated, both the parent and the child will respond favorably. But if one of them reacts negatively, those feelings will be transmitted to the other.

It is true that some Christian parents will be enthusiastic about the translation, no matter how poorly the text is rendered. But this is only because many of them have already been conditioned to less than adequate Bible translations, and so they approach any new translation with low expectations, whether they realize it or not. In order to make a really significant impact, we must set our sights beyond mere clarity and aim for a product that is not only acceptable, but appealing to both our primary and our secondary audiences.

### **Selectivity**

Although any valid translation must accurately reflect what the Greek or Hebrew says, we are occasionally able to exercise some degree of selectivity regarding the texts to be included in a given publication. Such was the case with *A Book about Jesus*, which is a topical arrangement of selections from the first three gospels, opening with the nativity narratives from Matthew and Luke and concluding with Matthew’s account of the death and resurrection. There we focused upon some people Jesus helped, some miracles he performed, and some things he taught. This will be followed by the Gospel of Luke, and then possibly by Acts.

*What’s the Bible About?* is also under preparation. This publication will include something from every book in the Bible and will be supplemented with introductions, transitional material, and other helps

for readers. In this way we hope both to arouse the interests of children by focusing upon persons and events and to make them feel more at home with the Bible by including representative selections from each book. A complete New Testament will also be made available for children, though at this time there are no definite plans for the entire Bible.

### Sensitivity

In Luke 6.15 Simon is referred to as the "Zealot", which we initially felt would be too difficult for children. And so, after reviewing several options, including "Nationalist", we finally settled on GNB's "Patriot". However, Archbishop Whealon of Hartford (our most conscientious and perceptive reviewer!) pointed out that in his part of the country, the children would want to know what position Simon played on the Boston Patriots team! So we immediately removed Simon from the roster and reinstated "Zealot" with a note.

It is not always possible to get around "circumcision", but in Luke 2.21 we managed to do so by rendering it, "Eight days later Jesus' parents did for him what the Law of Moses had commanded." A note accompanies the translation: "This refers to circumcision, the cutting of skin from the private part of Jewish boys eight days after they were born, to show that they belonged to God's people." Our intention was to avoid a potentially embarrassing situation in a group reading of the text, especially where both girls and boys are present. Once someone giggles in response to the word "circumcision" or asks about its meaning in a mixed group, there is little hope of getting their attention back to other aspects of the passage.

One reviewer had serious problems with our rendering of Matthew 1.18 ("she was going to have a baby by God's Holy Spirit") and so proposed, "And it was the Spirit of God that made her pregnant." In support of this proposal were the following arguments: "There is no natural way of saying that Mary had been impregnated by the Holy Spirit, since this is a most unusual event. But I find this an unnatural statement. Would we say, 'Jane is going to have a baby by Jim?' It seems to me we would say, 'Jane is going to have a baby, and the baby's father is Jim'; or 'Jane is pregnant, and it is Jim who made her pregnant'; or 'Jane has been made pregnant by Jim'; or 'Jim has gotten Jane pregnant'."

The problem, of course, is that each of these proposals implies illicit sex between two unmarried people, while Luke is narrating a unique event for which there is no real analogy. A detailed study of the Greek texts of Matthew and Luke will reveal just how carefully they considered the thoughts and feelings of their readers, and we must take no less care to avoid wrong connotations. We certainly do not want to imply that

Mary and the Holy Spirit had been messing around, and as a result she got pregnant!

### **Economy**

One of the dangers in translating for children is the assumption that the more words that are used, the clearer the meaning becomes. But this is not the case, for an over abundance of words not only muddles the meaning of a text, but diminishes its acceptability. A good example of this is found in Isaiah 11.1, which consists of seven words in Hebrew, but is translated by one sentence of thirty-three words in GNB: "The royal line of David is like a tree that has been cut down; but just as new branches sprout from a stump, so a new king will arise from among David's descendants." Moreover, in Hebrew the verse is part of a majestic poem, while in GNB it sounds like a quotation from a seed catalogue. The draft prepared for the children's translation is longer than the Hebrew, but considerably more economical than GNB, and attempts to be somewhat more poetic in structure:

"Like a branch sprouting up from a stump,  
one of David's descendants will someday be king."

In the telling of a story, impact is much more important for children than is detailed explanation. Compare, for example, the following two renderings of a verse from the parable of "A Rich Man" (Luke 12.20), the second of which is approximately forty percent shorter than the first:

- (1) You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life: then who will get all these things you have kept for yourself?
- (2) You fool! Tonight you will die! Then who will get what you have stored up?

Potted words of wisdom and proverbial sayings should also be kept as succinct as possible and worded so as to make for easy memorization, which is very important to children:

"It's better to be honest and poor, than to be dishonest and rich."  
(Proverbs 16.8)

"Wisdom is its own reward! If you make fun of it, you will suffer."  
(Proverbs 9.12)

"Gold and many rubies may still be found, but words of wisdom are rare!" (Proverbs 20.15)

"The wiser you are,  
the more you hurt,  
The smarter you are,  
the greater your pain." (Ecclesiastes 1.18)

"Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do." (Luke 5.31)

“New wine must only be put into new wine skins.” (Luke 5.38)

“People’s words show what is in their heart.” (Luke 6.45)

“We played the flute,  
but you would not dance.

We sang a funeral song,  
but you would not weep.” (Luke 7.32)

“If Satan fights against himself, how can his kingdom last?” (Luke 11.18)

“Your eyes are the lamp for your body.” (Luke 11.34)

“Salt is good, but if it no longer tastes like salt, how can it be made salty again?” (Luke 14.34)

“People who try to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives will save them.” (Luke 17.33)

### **Imagery**

Children have tremendous powers of imagination and enjoy the challenge of poetic imagery, perhaps even more so than most adults. They can (and often will!) quickly memorize anything that appeals to them, especially if it is clothed in imagery, rhythm, and rhyme. And so in the preparation of children’s texts, we have kept this observation in mind, though scrupulously avoiding rhyme schemes and rhythmic patterns which seem inappropriate. As a result, our translation has a larger percentage of its content in poetic form than do many common language translations. Moreover, a higher level of vocabulary and a more sophisticated style are tolerated for poetry than for strict prose. Without further comment, I will conclude this article with some samples which demonstrate this.

#### *(1) Psalm 19.1-6*

The heavens tell the glories of God  
and the skies declare his deeds.  
Each day informs the following day,  
each night announces to the next.  
They do not speak or say a word,  
and their voices are never heard.  
Yet their message reaches all the earth,  
it travels throughout the world.

In the heavens God set up a tent for the sun,  
which rises like a bridegroom,  
like a hero eager to run a race.  
It starts at one end of the sky  
and crosses to the other.  
Nothing is hidden from its heat.

**(2) Ecclesiastes 1.2-3**

Senseless! All is senseless!  
says the one who has seen it all.  
Completely senseless!  
Everything is senseless!  
What is there to show  
for all of the work  
that we do on earth?

**(3) Isaiah 1.2-8**

Heaven and earth, listen  
to what the Lord has said:  
“The children whom I raised  
have rebelled against me.  
Even an ox knows its owner,  
and donkeys come to the one  
who gives them food.  
But my people know nothing,  
Israel does not understand.

“Israel is a sinful nation,  
loaded down with guilt.  
Everyone is wicked, all are evil.  
They have rejected me, their Lord,  
the holy God of Israel.  
They have turned their backs on me!”

Israel, why be punished more?  
Why not give up your sin?  
Your head is badly bruised,  
and you are about to faint.  
From head to toe  
there's not a healthy spot.  
Cuts, bruises, and open sores  
go without treatment or care  
or olive oil to ease the pain.

Your country lies in ruins,  
and your cities are burned to the ground.  
Strangers steal your crops,  
while you watch and are helpless.  
They've turned your land into a desert,  
as foreign armies do.  
Jerusalem, the City of Zion,  
is like a hut in a vineyard.

Attacked from all sides, Jerusalem  
is like a shack in a melon patch.

*(4) Revelation 1.4-5*

Grace and peace to you  
from God who is and was  
and who is to come,  
from the seven spirits  
in front of God's throne,  
from Jesus Christ,  
the faithful witness,  
the first to be raised from death,  
and the ruler of all kings on earth.

LOUIS DORN

## STRUGGLING WITH THE PROPHETS IN TRANSLATION

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The prophets gave the people of Israel and Judah many uncomfortable moments. They still give us problems as we try to translate their writings today. In this brief article we shall review some of the more frequent problems and try to find solutions, or at least some guidelines leading to solutions. Most of the problems the translator finds in any one of the books of the prophets must be handled individually, and the solutions must be found with the help of the UBS Guides or Handbooks, or a good commentary on that book.

### **Prophets and their task**

In the Bible prophets seem to appear on the scene with little or no explanation as to who they were or how they fitted into the religious system of the times. However, it appears that some were officially recognized, whether by the Temple officials, by the king, or by both. Others seem to have been upstarts, coming on the scene uninvited and usually unwelcome.