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## THE "HARDER READING" IN TEXTUAL CRITICISM: AN APPLICATION OF THE SECOND LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

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How can the cooling of a pan of hot water be in any way related to the textual difficulties found in comparing different manuscripts of the Greek New Testament? Although the suggestion may at first appear bizarre, the truth of the matter is that the second law of thermodynamics, aptly illustrated by the cooling of a pan of hot water, involves a principle which bears a striking similarity to one that is encountered in the study of New Testament textual problems.

In the science of textual criticism, whether of the New Testament or of other documents, one fundamental principle is that which states that "the harder reading (of two or more variant texts) is likely to be the more original." People sometimes wonder why this, instead of the reverse, should be so; and New Testament scholars themselves, while subscribing to the principle, are frequently unaware that it is in fact an application of a general principle which was first discovered in physics and has since been recognized as operating in the field of information theory.

The second law of thermodynamics, illustrated most simply by the fact that heat tends to travel from a hot object to a cooler object (instead of the reverse), can be applied generally to say that anything in the universe which is systematically organized tends to revert towards a state of inert uniformity. Living matter, for example, is subject to death and decay. Water runs downhill. Any arrangement or condition which is specialized or unusual, i.e. which has a low degree of statistical probability, will in the course of time tend toward a condition that is less specialized (i.e. more random). For example, if two dice with both sixes face up are shaken, the probability of their falling the next time in this same combination is only 1 in 36. If a galley of moveable type containing this article were to be dropped on the floor, the probability of being able to make sense from the type when scooped up would be essentially zero, since the arrangement of the type would now be almost random. The energy present in the molecules of a hot object, such as a closed pan of hot water left in a room, is gradually dissipated until the water takes on the temperature of the room itself: the difference in temperature between the water and the room is "leveled

out.” The resulting state is one that tends toward what is known as “entropy.”

In a recent meeting of Bible translators some persons argued strongly in defense of a translation of Mark 1.2 as “even as it is written in the prophets,” because it is obvious that the quotation which immediately follows does not come from “Isaiah the prophet” (as in the reading of the best and oldest Greek manuscripts), but the first part comes from Malachi and only the second part from Isaiah. Since “in the prophets” is obviously a more accurate reflection of the source of the composite quotation, why not follow the reading found in many manuscripts which say just this? Why should one in such a case adopt a so-called “harder reading,” one which would seem to be less probable since it does not fit the context so well? In fact, scholars who insist upon giving preference to the “harder readings” might appear at times to be insensitive to principles of accuracy and consistency. In the work of translation, why not follow a text which seems to make more sense and which appears to fit the context more neatly? Upon close examination, however, it is discovered that this is precisely what ancient scribes apparently thought, for they likewise realized, in the case of Mark 1.2 that the quotation came from both Malachi and Isaiah, and therefore they *changed* the reading “in Isaiah the prophet” to “in the prophets.”

If we are really to understand what is involved in this principle of the “harder reading,” we must note some of the kinds of changes which took place in the successive copying of manuscripts. Basically the various kinds of textual alterations which have occurred can be classified as either accidental or purposeful. The accidental changes may be the result of either faulty vision or faulty hearing. For example, when a scribe was copying a manuscript and two adjoining lines began or ended with the same words, it was easy enough to omit a line. In the same way, it sometimes happened that a line or phrase was repeated because the eye had not correctly moved down the column. It was also possible for a copyist to make mistakes because the forms of letters were not clear and one letter could be mistakenly taken for another. There are a number of instances in New Testament manuscripts in which it is difficult to determine whether a combination of letters really represents an abbreviation of a proper name or some other word. Thus a copyist might have felt completely justified in making certain changes in the forms of letters if the change would seem to result in better sense.

Other accidental changes were due to problems in hearing. In New Testament times a number of vowels and vowel combinations of written Greek were pronounced exactly the same. This meant, for example, that the words meaning “you” and “we” were identical in sound, and it was very easy indeed to mistake one for the other. The possibility of mistakes of this kind was increased by the fact that it was a practice in ancient times for one person to read a text aloud while several scribes were engaged in copying it down from dictation. A particularly interesting variation resulting from a mistake of this kind is found in 2 Corinthians 8.7, where some manuscripts have “your love for us” and others have “our love for you.” Remembering that the forms of the second person and first person plural sounded exactly alike, it is easy enough to see how this difficulty could arise.

The conscious changes made by scribes, however, involve far more

difficulties than the accidental changes. In some instances, scribes evidently wanted to harmonize the contents of different books. This is particularly true in accounts of the same events, and they occur conspicuously in parallel passages of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In other instances scribes apparently wanted to harmonize some of the theological concepts in certain books with those in other books, and in other cases they attempted to harmonize seemingly obscure statements with what they regarded as general knowledge. They also tended to substitute a well-known word for a difficult or unusual term, and frequently they would attempt to simplify awkward or unusual grammatical expressions. Apparently some scribes even wanted to improve certain stylistic features of the Greek used by New Testament writers. Practically all of these changes reflected a tendency to "level out" difficulties. That is to say, to remove things which seemed inconsistent either with the text of the Bible itself or with general human experience. Strange and difficult expressions were therefore changed into those which seemed to fit better and were, in a sense, more commonplace.

In order to appreciate the implication of this leveling or adjusting of the text to context (whether internal or external), different kinds of problems may be noted. A change in the text in order to accommodate its content to evidence from other parts of the Bible is well illustrated by the omission in some manuscripts of the phrase "in the time of Abiathar, the High Priest" (Mark 2.26). In the Old Testament account of David and his men eating the bread of the presence, it was not Abiathar who gave David and his men the bread but his father, Ahimelech. The omission of this phrase in some manuscripts of Mark seemed further justified in part by the fact that it does not occur in the parallel accounts of Matthew and Luke.

Another example of an effort by scribes to eliminate from the text what they regarded as an obvious historical error is found in Mark 6.22. The better manuscripts have "his daughter by Herodias," but the dancing girl, called Salome in secular history (as in the writings of Josephus), was born before Herod took Herodias away from his brother Philip. In Matthew 14.6 the dancing girl is correctly called "the daughter of Herodias." Therefore, some scribe (or scribes) felt justified in changing the reading and making Mark 6.22 also read "the daughter of Herodias."

In some instances scribes added historical information, perhaps as a way of filling out the text. Some of these expressions may originally have been merely notes in the margin of a manuscript. When such a manuscript was later copied, the scribe might have taken the words in the margin as something which had inadvertently been omitted by an earlier copyist and later added when the manuscript was carefully reread and corrected. For example, in Luke 9.54, where James and John want to call down fire from heaven to destroy some Samaritans who offended them, some manuscripts have the added phrase, "as Elijah did," but the earliest manuscripts do not have it. Elijah did call fire from heaven to destroy men on a certain occasion (2 Kings 1.9-12), and this may have occurred at or near the place where the offensive Samaritans lived, thus giving the "Sons of Thunder" their capital idea! "As Elijah did" may well have been a marginal comment in one manuscript which later was mistakenly copied into the text of another.

In some cases scribes altered the grammar in order to make the expression easier to understand. Such changes may even have been made unconsciously. In Luke 12.1 the parenthetical expression "which is hypocrisy" is inserted after "leaven" in the phrase "the leaven of the Pharisees" instead of at the end of the phrase. It is not difficult to see why some scribes evidently changed the order of the words in order to make the phrase more readily comprehensible. In this instance there is no real change in meaning, but more often than not any simplification of grammar involves at least some shift in meaning. For example, in Mark 1.4 the Greek phrase containing the participle *baptizōn* "baptizing" apparently seemed to some scribes to be grammatically awkward. Furthermore, instead of the participle referring to what John was doing in the desert, namely, "baptizing," some scribes evidently felt that the participle was better interpreted as a title, and hence they simplified the grammar so as to mean, "John the Baptist appeared in the desert."

It is easy to understand how scribes would tend to eliminate unusual and difficult combinations of words by substituting more commonplace phrases. In Mark 1.14 the better attested phrase is "the gospel of God," but since this expression appears nowhere else in the gospels, and Matthew three times speaks of "the gospel of the kingdom," it is not difficult to see why and how scribes would have "leveled out" the text by putting "the gospel of the kingdom of God." In Mark 3.29 there is a particularly strange phrase, "eternal sin," perhaps better rendered "eternal guilt." This phrase is well attested in excellent manuscripts, but some scribes obviously felt this to be strange and awkward and so substituted "judgment" for "sin," the combination "eternal judgment" being a well-known and a frequently used expression.

Some modifications in a text may reflect theological concepts which were dominant at a particular time. For example, in Mark 9.29 the best attested text indicates that the particular kind of unclean spirit which had attacked a certain boy could only be cast out "by means of prayer." Later, however, some scribes added "and fasting." Within the early church there was a considerable increase of emphasis upon fasting as something which should accompany prayer, especially prayer relating to difficult issues. Still other scribal additions to the text are merely typical expansions of well-known combinations of words. In Mark 2.16 the statement "he eats with tax collectors and sinners" is expanded in some manuscripts to "he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners."

Changes in unusual forms of words are quite common. For example, in Mark 3.19 the form *Iskarioth* is changed in a number of manuscripts to *Iskariotēs*, thus giving to the word a typical Greek suffix used in designating a person coming from a particular place.

Not a few changes in manuscripts result from conscious or unconscious adjustments to the immediate context. In Mark 3.20 the better attested text is simply "he went home." Jesus, however, was obviously accompanied by other persons, and so in a number of manuscripts the personal ending of the verb has been made plural and so means "they went home." Precisely the opposite change takes place in Mark 6.14, where the better form of the text may be translated as "they (people) were saying that John the Baptist had risen from the dead." However, since King Herod is mentioned just before this clause, it is

understandable that scribes would place the verb in the singular, attributing this statement to Herod himself.

Manuscripts often reflect what might be regarded as stylistic improvements. For example, the Gospel of Mark has many occurrences of *euthus* "immediately." In Mark 5.42 this term occurs twice in the same relatively short verse. It is not at all strange, therefore, that some manuscripts which have a tendency to introduce stylistic improvements have dropped the second occurrence of *euthus*.

In some instances the use of typical phrases results in what is called a "conflate reading," that is to say, a combination of expressions which seem to fit and to emphasize the context. These additions may have resulted from copyists not wanting to lose anything which they felt may have possibly existed in the original text. But in Mark 9.45 they amplified an earlier form "into Gehenna" in various ways: "into the Gehenna of fire," "into unquenchable fire," and "into Gehenna into unquenchable fire."

Often it is not easy to determine the reason for a particular change made by a copyist, especially when several possible reasons may be adduced. In Mark 7.19 Jesus says that food does not make a person ritually unclean since it does not go into the heart but into the stomach and then out into the latrine or sewer. This statement is followed by a phrase which says, literally, "cleansing all foods." The better attested form of the verb translated "cleansing" has an ending which points to Jesus as the one who cleanses all foods. But since the last reference to Jesus is in the verb "he says" at the beginning of verse 18, it is not surprising that some scribes changed the form of the participle "cleansing" to agree with the word meaning "latrine." This change certainly results in a simpler grammar, and it appears to fit better the immediate context. It would likewise be in harmony with the general knowledge and ideas about such matters prevailing at the time the first copies were made. Furthermore, to say that Jesus was thus declaring all foods to be ritually clean would seem to be a contradiction—certainly to Jewish practice and possibly to the thinking of scribes who might insist that Jesus came not to destroy the law but to fulfil it.

But now, to return to the relation which the second law of thermodynamics has to such changes, accidental or deliberate, introduced by scribes as they made copies of Greek New Testament manuscripts. Note how in case after case the changes made by scribes really produced a kind of leveling, a smoothing out, of seemingly difficult, inconsistent, or unusual forms and changing them to forms which were common, ordinary, and completely consistent with the context. The result of these changes was usually a text which was more redundant, more easily anticipated from the context. One might describe this process as a kind of semantic leveling in which unusual, difficult, and complex expressions are changed into expressions which are easier to understand and more readily anticipated by a reader because they fit the context more neatly. They are "easier readings"—easier precisely because they are less specialized or unusual, hence having a greater degree of probability or predictability in relation to their contexts than do the "harder" or more unusual readings.

This process of levelling, therefore, is strikingly analogous to what happens when our pan of hot water, left in a room, took on the temperature of its

surroundings, following the second law of thermodynamics. Another example of this law is what would happen to a pile of sand left out in the open. Natural forces (quite apart from the activity of children who love to play in piles of sand!) will ultimately level it so that it would be practically indistinguishable from its surroundings. Likewise, any construction left alone will ultimately disintegrate and become an indistinguishable part of its environment. This is, of course, essentially what takes place in the history of manuscript transmission through the process of copying and recopying. Unusual and distinctive features tend to be eliminated and the resulting text acquires a kind of "literary commonness."

The science of textual analysis is really directed to reversing this process. It analyses the tendencies whereby copyists, consciously or unconsciously, are apt to level out or eliminate important distinctive features. Thus there has arisen the principle that, when textual variations occur, preference should be given to "the harder reading." This principle does not, of course, stand alone. It is combined with other types of evidence to help recover what was, in all probability, the reading in the earliest form of the text.

One must not imagine that this principle of the priority of "the harder reading" (as interpreted in terms of entropy or the second law of thermodynamics) is restricted to the analysis of New Testament texts. This same principle of textual analysis has proven to be sound in the case of all kinds of textual reconstruction, involving not only the texts of ancient literary productions in Greek and Latin, but also attempts to reconstruct the original form of texts in modern languages. Professor Archibald A. Hill deals with these issues, both directly and indirectly, in a fascinating book entitled *Constituent and Pattern in Poetry* (1976, Austin and London: University of Texas Press), reflecting Martin Joos's earlier work on semantic theorems, involving probability and the application of the second law of thermodynamics.

What does all this mean to Bible translators? In the first place, it means that there is a valid basis for the principle of "the harder reading," and translators should therefore beware of adopting any reading which significantly violates this principle. The most satisfactory guide for the application of this and other principles is to be found in the Greek New Testament text published by the United Bible Societies and in the preliminary reports on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project. The latter deals with some five thousand passages in the Old Testament where textual difficulties occur.

This principle has a further important implication for Bible translation. Translators often find themselves in essentially the same position as early copyists. They are tempted to make certain alterations in the text which seemingly will simplify it for the readers, making it more consistent and thus more comprehensible. Some translators, for example, have wanted to change certain features of the account of the baptism of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark so that they will agree more closely with the account in the Gospel of John. (Why these translators seem to feel that John must be regarded as more accurate than Mark in this particular is difficult to determine.) Other translators have wanted to make certain changes in the Epistle of James, feeling that it is not sufficiently Pauline in its emphasis upon faith. And some have flatly refused to translate "God repented" (Genesis 6.6-7), because they insist that God could

not change his mind or feel sorry for what he has done. Again, some translators have wanted to tone down the erotic language of the Song of Songs, and others have wanted to alter some of the more pessimistic statements in the book of Ecclesiastes, either by inserting qualifiers in the text itself or using notes to soften some of the implications of the book's apparent agnosticism. However, intellectual honesty, spiritual sensitivity, and concern for both the inspiration and the authority of Scriptures should restrain one from imitating the methods of those copyists who, even with the best of intentions, sometimes failed to carry out the true and proper responsibilities of their strategic task.

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## RECEPTOR LANGUAGE STYLE AND BIBLE TRANSLATION: A SEARCH FOR "LANGUAGE WHICH GRABS THE HEART".

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### Part One: Exploiting the Resources of the Receptor Language

#### The Problem

In the model of translation proposed by Nida and Taber in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (hereafter TAPOT), the communication of messages across languages is factored into a three-stage activity: analysis, transfer, and restructuring.<sup>1</sup> The goal is to reproduce in the receptor language (RL) the "closest natural equivalent" of the original message in the source language (SL). This three-step model gives a useful perspective of the translation process as it theoretically *can* be carried out in an explicit and exact manner. In practice, however, it appears that the individual steps often turn out to be emphasized in an order of decreasing importance from one to three when training Bible translators. The danger here is that if the "restructuring" stage, in particular, is neglected during the instruction programme, the result could well be a translated text that is neither "close" to the original version nor a "natural" rendering in the language in which it is composed. In this article I will be concerned especially with the problem of *naturalness* and how to encourage national translators to speak the "language that grabs the heart"<sup>2</sup> (or as they

<sup>1</sup> Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. London: UBS, 1969, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Another picturesque metaphor describing idiomatically-spoken Chewa is *cichewa camcere* "Cichewa of salt". Salt is the one essential seasoning agent without which food is regarded as tasteless. So too, a vivid style of speaking/writing is what gives a message its "flavor"—its distinctive quality. *Cichewa cogwira mtima* "compelling Chewa" refers more to the emotive aspect of style in the language, while *cichewa camcere* "seasoned Chewa" alludes more to its artistic aspect.

Cichewa, or as it is known in Zambia—Cinyanja, is a Bantu language that is spoken in many parts of Central Africa by an estimated six to seven million people, including a great many second-language speakers. Cichewa is the dominant representative of a number of closely related dialects which have, until recently, been referred to jointly as Cinyanja.