

Translating these devices literally may give us a picture of the way the Hebrew writers used language, but for many readers much of the meaning is lost because their own literary tradition uses different devices (or the same devices for different ends). It may also be true that the use of literary devices in drastically different frequencies creates loss of impact because of differences in expectations. Finally, loss of meaning and impact may be due to the inability of readers to pick out the "thread of discourse" due to the heavy use of rhetorical devices and sheer length of text.

GRAHAM S. OGDEN

TRANSLATION PROBLEMS IN ECCLESIASTES 5.13-17

The Rev. Dr Graham Ogden is a UBS Translation Consultant based in Taipei

The first and most basic step in any translation task is to understand the meaning of the text to be translated. In this brief article I wish to address the problem of meaning in Ec 5.13-17 and thus look at the way in which we might improve our translations of those verses.

The problem

The specific problem in Ec 5.13-17 lies in identifying the referents of the third person pronouns. If we are to translate the passage adequately we must first establish who is being referred to by these pronouns, then make that clear in the translation.

Commentators are divided in their opinion about who is the main subject of verses 14-16: for some it is the father who is being referred to, while for others it is the son who is born to the rich man. Translations generally have found it easier to leave the question unanswered, so they have not made clear who the subject is. GNB has taken the view that in verses 15-17, "he" is "everyman" and so has consistently translated the pronoun "he" as "we" or "our".

The text

From the following quotations we can see how two basic English translations have dealt with the third person singular masculine pronouns in this passage.

RSV

¹³ There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by **their** owner to **his** hurt,

¹⁴ and those riches were lost in a bad venture; and **he** is the father of a son, but **he** has nothing in **his** hand.

¹⁵ As **he** came from **his** mother's womb, **he** shall go again, naked as **he** came, and shall take nothing for **his** toil, which **he** may carry away in **his** hand.

¹⁶ This is also a grievous evil: just as **he** came, so shall **he** go; and what gain has **he** that **he** toiled for the wind,

¹⁷ and spent all **his** days in darkness and grief, in much vexation and sickness and resentment?

GNB

Here is a terrible thing that I have seen in this world: people save up **their** money for a time when **they** may need it, and then lose it all in some unlucky deal and end up with nothing left to pass on to **their** children.

We leave this world just as **we** entered it—with nothing. In spite of all **our** work there is nothing **we** can take with us.

It isn't right! **We** go just as **we** came. **We** labour, trying to catch the wind, and what do **we** get?

We have to live **our** lives in darkness and grief, worried, angry, and sick.

Towards a solution

(1) Chapter 5 in this book is somewhat mixed with regard to its subject matter. Verses 1-7 touch on liturgical concerns; verses 8-9 discuss the problem of oppression in society; verses 10-12 expand on the theme of materialism's inability to satisfy our need for a fulfilling life. Although there is a general connection of theme between the concerns of verses 13-17 and the preceding section, in terms of details there is no relationship at all. Simply put, the immediate context of 5.13-17 does not shed light on the problem we are hoping to deal with. Any evidence we have will be found only within the confines of the passage itself.

The section 5.13-17 is introduced by one of the author's standard phrases, "There is a grievous evil . . ." Although there are verbal associations between this section and 5.10-12 (note the shared use of "riches" and "owner"), it is clear that verses 13-17 represent yet another example of life in this world. Here is another of the many dilemmas which we may observe; the Hebrew term translated "evil" denotes that the situation is something painful to behold rather than immoral in itself.

Following the introductory phrase, the situation is described in verses 13b-14a. A person tries to hold on to the wealth he or she has accumulated. GNB has already determined that this is an example of "everyman" and so has rendered the noun phrase "their (or, its) owner" as "people". This must imply that the translators saw no connection

between this "owner" and the individual mentioned in the previous verses. RSV then suggests that these riches were held "to his hurt". Under normal circumstances we would expect that any individual will make every attempt to retain what he or she has worked to obtain. The purpose is to ensure that wealth is not lost or goods stolen. When RSV states that the goods were kept "to his hurt", it interprets this as a result clause rather than a purpose clause. The Hebrew would allow either possibility, so we shall need to consider this point more closely, to see if a decision is possible.

To describe the problem he observed, the author has used two prepositional phrases, each prefaced with the same Hebrew preposition, though rendered differently in English. In the first phrase "by their owner", the preposition "by" identifies the one who keeps or protects his goods, though there are some scholars who think that the preposition should be rendered "for". If the latter is the case, then others are protecting his goods on his behalf (see 1 Sam 9.24). However, after the passive participle this preposition more frequently indicates agency, "by", as in Gen 31.15; Ex 12.16. Thus we identify the owner as the one doing the keeping.

The second prepositional phrase, "to his hurt", introduced by the same Hebrew preposition, can be either a result clause or purpose clause. If we determine that this phrase expresses the result of what he did, then we give its meaning as "(but) it turned out to be disastrous." There are problems with this rendering because of the syntax: firstly, an adversative "but" is required; also the suffix on the noun "disaster", literally "his/its disaster" should be viewed as an object rather than as the possessive pronoun. It is more appropriate to view the phrase as marking purpose, in which case the phrase says something like "with a view to his (possible) hurt", or "against its (possible) loss". The person is protecting wealth so as not to lose what he or she has. GNB "for a time when they may need it" seems to have wandered far from the sense of the term "hurt". We conclude that the most likely sense here is that the prepositional phrase which RSV renders as "to his hurt" is a purpose clause, and that it indicates the potential disaster against which the owner hopes to defend.

Despite these good intentions, the author describes in verse 14 what happened: the man lost his wealth in what most translations call "a bad venture" or similar. The introductory conjunction is better translated "but" rather than "and". In 1.13 he has once before used this phrase; there RSV suggested it meant "an unhappy business". Neither of these two examples provides us with enough information to ascertain what the cause of his loss was—the simple fact remains that he lost his money. The Hebrew term behind RSV's "venture" may not have any commercial sense, but GNB "an unlucky deal" appears to conclude that it does. A general term such as "misfortune" probably conveys its meaning best.

To this point in the story, there are no major difficulties for the

interpreter, as the basic train of thought is clear—a person takes steps to preserve his wealth but unfortunately loses it. Loss of wealth, whether it be a lot or a little, and regardless of how that loss is sustained, is tragic.

(2) The second half of verse 14, though not marked in any obvious grammatical or syntactic manner, introduces a complete change of subject. As we look further, we observe that the phrases “nothing” and “in his hand”, together with the paired actions “go out”, “return” and “come”, “go”, as metaphors for birth and death, are present in both verses 14b and 15. These features express the connection in thought between the two verses. Unfortunately for the interpreter the players are identified only as “he”, so we must press further to discover more precisely who “he” is in each case. In principle, this brief sub-section should be interpreted independently of the preceding verses 13-14, as its literary features just mentioned point to its being a distinctive sub-unit.

The fact that the birth of a child suddenly intrudes into the passage, having nothing directly to do with the owner’s loss of savings, and also that the focus now moves to the lack of material possessions (“nakedness”) at the moment of birth and death, together suggest that this example is in the nature of an “aside”. It is then an independent example of human experience which the author has investigated. Therefore, “he” in these verses has no necessary and direct connection with the “he” of verses 13-14a. The author in fact demonstrates that this is a second example of a “grievous evil” by saying as much in verse 16.

Verse 14b begins with an apparently consecutive construction, that is, it seems to join and follow on from verse 14a. But the subject of the verb in verse 14a is not the same as that in 14b. We assume therefore that the connector prefixed to the verb is an introductory particle, not the consecutive marker.

If we look at the text of verse 14 we note that it reads literally “he gave birth to a son (or, child)”. Assuming on rhetorical grounds, that this is an independent example of “he”, then the subject of the verb “fathering” is someone other than the wealthy man mentioned in verses 13-14a. The third person masculine singular subject of the verb is some other male individual. We approach its correct sense if we render the initial verb phrase as “Now, when a man fathers a child”, or more colloquially (in English) “Now, when a child is born . . .”

A second phrase describes lack of possessions, literally “there is nothing in his hand”. A decision is required as to who it is that the author is describing when he says they have nothing; whose hand is empty? Is it the father’s hand, or is it “people” in general as GNB states, or is it the child’s hand which is empty, or both father’s and child’s? From the fuller context of verses 14b-15 we can argue that it is the new-born child just referred to who is the one so described. Justification for this view lies in the fact that it is the nearest subject and also that the section as a whole focusses on entering and leaving the world without material possessions. Thus our translation can be “the

child has nothing in his hand", or more explicitly, "the child brings nothing with him into the world".

Verse 15 continues the theme of entering and leaving the world without possessions and so must refer to a child at the moment of birth and to any person (young or aged) as they pass from this world in death. The subject of the verb "come out", or more directly "be born", can be none other than the child. It identifies all children at birth and so "he" can be better rendered as "any child". GNB's generalisation is technically correct, of course, but because it has already committed itself to a "universalist" interpretation throughout, it results in a problematic translation. At the moment of birth, a child has nothing in the way of material possessions, not because its father has unfortunately lost all his wealth at the gambling tables or stock market, but simply because this is the nature of things—a child enters this world "naked", literally and metaphorically without anything. By the same token, when he dies, he departs this life unencumbered by any material goods, as Job 1.21 also notes.

Thus we can suggest a translation of verse 15a as follows: "A child enters the world empty-handed, and will leave it in the same way," or "Just as a child is born without possessions, he departs this world in the same state."

Having described the literal and figurative "nakedness" of an individual at birth and death, the author emphasises the fact that all wealth a person has accumulated must be left behind when he dies. Everything generated by a person's labour remains here, and we can carry nothing away with us. The third person singular masculine subject of the verb "he shall take nothing" is that same child who has now departed this world. Whether death comes soon or late is not the author's concern here; it is the fact of death itself that concerns him. The opening phrase of verse 16 identifies this as the second calamity.

Verses 13-16a describe two very different situations. In the first, a wealthy person tries to hold on to his wealth but unfortunately loses it all (verses 13-14a). The second example (verses 14b-16a) reminds the reader that by the very nature of death, a person departs this life as naked of material things as when he or she was born. So, whether we lose our wealth in unfortunate circumstances before death, or not, it makes little difference in the end, for when we depart this world we still have nothing.

(3) As for the remainder of verse 16, it can be seen to have the nature of a summary statement, drawn from the illustrative material in the two above examples. The third person masculine singular pronoun in verse 16b, because of its general nature, should be rendered as "a person" or "one". Whether we lose our wealth through misfortune, or whether we die wealthy, the dilemma which the author is addressing is that we have to leave this world as naked as the day we entered it. It is just this

situation which provokes again the question about “advantage” or “lasting benefit” and whether it is available at all in this world of pain and anguish.

The interpretation and translation of verse 17 is more problematic due partly to textual difficulties. It begins with the particle “also” indicating that it offers an additional fact for consideration. First of all, the verb “eat” has been questioned on the basis of the Septuagint reading “mourning”. Some commentators consider this change unwarranted, in which case they understand the subject of the verb “eat” to be the individual spoken of in verse 16. The change to “mourning” has much to commend it, especially as it forms a likely pair with “darkness” and death. It also fits closely with the theme of the other nouns in the list following. Whichever text we adopt, the general reference of verse 16 to “a person” or “one” can be continued into this final verse. “Darkness” may describe the human condition, its depressing and problem-filled state. However, it most likely has an extended meaning, including death as in 6.4 and 11.8. Thus a person is said to spend an entire lifetime in a world made dark because of the presence of death and mourning.

As for the second half of verse 17, the verbal form “be angry” should read as the noun form “anger”. The noun phrase “his sickness” adds an unexplained pronominal suffix, which the Versions omit. Allowing this minor change the text then runs smoothly, producing a translation, “. . . much anger, sickness and resentment”.

It is possible to identify and make explicit in translation each of the third person masculine singular pronouns in these verses. If our interpretation is correct then we can improve on the RSV’s lack of clarity and GNB’s generalising.

A suggested translation is:

¹³Here is a terrible thing that I observed in the world; a rich man was protecting his wealth against loss, ¹⁴but misfortune overtook him and he lost everything.

Now, when a man fathers a child (or, when a child is born), the child brings nothing into the world. ¹⁵As a child enters the world without possessions, so it will depart it in the same manner; it can take nothing which it laboured to save. ¹⁶This is also a terrible thing.

Just as a person enters this world, so will he leave it. What then is the lasting benefit available to one who toils for breath like this, ¹⁷surrounded throughout his life by death and mourning, much anger, sickness, and resentment?