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LAZARUS AND SIMON

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In an article entitled "What's in a Name?" in the January 1989 issue of *The Bible Translator*, I discussed the importance of translating certain names in the Old Testament rather than transliterating them, when the meaning of the name is important for understanding the total meaning of a particular passage in which the name occurs. In this article, I continue that subject by considering the translation of two names in the New Testament: **Lazarus** (Lk 16.19-31) and **Simon**, who is referred to as "the Cananaean" (Mt 19.4; Mk 3.18) or "the Zealot" (Lk 6.15; Acts 1.13).

Lazarus

Many commentaries note that this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is similar to an Egyptian folk-tale which had influenced a number of Jewish stories which were known at the time of Jesus. G.B. Caird declares that Jesus "was using a familiar folk-tale and adapting it to a new purpose by adding an unfamiliar twist to the end of it"; and William Manson writes that "the story would not seem to have been invented ad hoc by Jesus." Whether Jesus actually knew this folk-tale is not important for the purpose of this short article on the name **Lazarus**. What is important is the meaning of the name.

According to Fitzmyer the name Lazarus is a "grecized, shortened form of Hebrew or Aramaic 'El'azar, known from the OT." Fitzmyer notes that "it is a fitting name for the beggar in this parable, who was not helped by a fellow human being, but in his afterlife is consoled by God."

According to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, edited by Bauer, Gingrich, and Danker, the name *la'azar* is a rabbinic abbreviation of *'el'azar*, which means "He (whom) God helps." It is interesting, and probably significant, that apart from Abraham in this same parable, this is the only character in the parables of Jesus who is given a name. Perhaps the name was given so that in the latter part of the parable, Abraham would have a name by which to refer to this poor man. But most likely the name was intended to have a symbolic meaning also. For though it is quite apparent in the first part of the parable that the rich man did not go out of his way to help Lazarus, **God** did!

E. Earle Ellis considers it "very likely" that the name was chosen for its symbolism, and Eduard Schweizer notes that "the poor man is not just someone; his name is short for Eliezar, 'helped by God.'" Assuming that Ellis and Schweizer are correct in seeing symbolic meaning in this name, then a simple transliteration of the name in the text of Luke omits an element of meaning that the parable originally carried. Since Luke elsewhere in his writings explains to his readers the meanings of the Semitic names Tabitha (Acts 9.36) and Elymas (Acts 13.8), his Gentile reader:

probably did not catch this symbolic meaning in the name Lazarus, but that is no reason why translations today cannot attempt to preserve the meaning.

One way to do so would be to translate the name Lazarus as "He Whom God Helps." Another way would be to put an explanation in a footnote or in an entry in a glossary or word list. The third, which I am recommending, is to include this symbolic meaning in the section heading which translators supply for this parable. Most translations use the very simple and unimaginative heading: "The Rich Man and Lazarus."

One translator in Sierra Leone, West Africa, upon learning the meaning of the name Lazarus, decided that the section heading would indeed be a good place to indicate the meaning of the name, and thereby preserve for the reader the symbolism apparently intended by Jesus. This translator wrote the following as the section heading to this parable: "The Rich Man and Lazarus (whose name means The One Whom God Helps)."

Simon the Cananaean

In a helpful article entitled "Dealing With Proper Nouns in Translation" in the April 1986 issue of *The Bible Translator*, Jill Smith discusses the translation of "Simon the Cananaean" (Mt 10.4; Mk 3.18) and "Simon the Zealot" (Lk 6.15; Acts 1.13). She correctly remarks that the description of Simon as a Cananaean should not be confused with the term "Canaanite," which refers to a person from the land of Canaan. Exactly this confusion does exist, however, in the understanding of many readers, including some pastors with seminary or Bible college education. Mark and Matthew use the Aramaic word *qan'ana* whereas Luke uses the Greek translation of this Aramaic word.

Smith indicates several ways of handling the translation of these terms "Cananaean" and "Zealot": (1) Transliterate the Aramaic and Greek words and put the explanation into a footnote (such as in the New Jerusalem Bible) or into a glossary (as in *Versión Popular* and Good News Bible); (2) Translate the words, using some generic equivalent such as "the Patriot" as in GNB or *el Fanatico* as in the *Nueva Biblia Española*; (3) Transliterate the two words and put an explanation in parentheses in the text of the gospels following the transliterations; (4) Use a (perhaps) lengthy phrase to translate these terms. Smith prefers the first approach and seems to reject the fourth solution because it requires a phrase which is too long.

In my work with translators in West Africa and South America, I have been recommending the fourth approach. My reasons are the following:

- (1) My experience indicates that when "Cananaean" is transliterated people do tend to understand this as a geographical designation, thinking that Simon was from either the city of Cana or the land of Canaan. Why should readers look in a footnote or a glossary to understand something which they think that they already understand? The word "zealot" when transliterated from English, French, or

- Spanish usually has no meaning in the receptor language, unlike “Cananaean” which often has a meaning, albeit an incorrect meaning.
- (2) Many projects with which I work are not using footnotes. Whether they should do so is another issue. The fact is that many do not.
 - (3) There is no shame in using a lengthy phrase to translate a single word in the source text (that is, in Hebrew or Greek). One example will make clear that this is so. Mt 23.5 says that the scribes and Pharisees “make their phylacteries broad.” Some West African languages have one word for “phylacteries” since Islamic influence is strong and people daily see Moslems wearing phylacteries. On the other hand, in most of North America the average reader would not know the difference between a prophylactic and a phylactery (both of which share a common Greek root). GNB therefore uses fifteen (!) words to translate “phylactery”: “the straps with scripture verses on them which they wear on their foreheads and arms.” *Versión Popular* and *Français Courant* similarly use nearly a dozen words in Spanish and French respectively to translate this one Greek word.

Suggestion for translating “Cananaean” and “Zealot”

Recently while I was working with the Chorote translator of northern Argentina, the missionary who was advising on the interpretation of the biblical text suggested that the expression “the Nationalist” would probably be a better English translation of these words than “the Patriot.” Indeed, “the Nationalist” is how William Barclay translated these two words. But that suggestion still did not help the Chorote translator. Finally we settled on the following: “Simon, one who fought against the Romans who had made themselves chiefs of the Jews.”

This translation avoids suggesting that the Zealots existed as an **organized group** at the time of Jesus. The first edition of the Spanish common language New Testament *Versión Popular* translated the words “Cananaean” and “zealot” as *miembro del partido cananista*, a translation which suggests, probably incorrectly, that the Zealots existed as an organized group or party at the time of Jesus. Richard Horsley has recently argued that the Zealots as an identifiable group emerged only **during** the revolt against Rome as a coalition of peasants-turned-bandits groups. PHEME PERKINS identifies a zealot as a “person who opposed the Roman occupation of Palestine which began in 63 B.C.” Unlike Horsley, Perkins claims that this “nationalistic party” emerged **before** the revolt against Rome; but in line with most recent scholarship and in opposition to earlier scholarship in this century, she dates the formation of the Zealots as an organized party in the ten years leading up to the revolt rather than at the beginning of the first century.

More important for translators is Perkins’ suggestion that Simon was a zealot in “the older sense of the word, namely, a person who is devoted to the law, who is ‘zealous’ for God.” She reasons that since Jesus himself appears not to have been a zealot and was not willing to align himself with that form of resistance (see Mk 12.17), then Simon was probably not a

political zealot. Though Perkins may be correct, her first suggestion does not necessarily require her conclusion.

Louw and Nida correctly caution against translating these words as “an armed insurrectionist” or “guerilla fighter” since Simon may have simply been zealous for national independence. With this warning in mind, perhaps the words “fought against the Romans” suggested above should be changed to “opposed the Romans” or “was against the Romans who had made themselves chiefs of the Jews.”

The Chorote translation at least moves closer to the correct meaning than does a transliteration of the Aramaic and Greek words *qan'ana* and *zelote* and, I would hope, sets the verse in its historical context. Is it too much a paraphrase? No, not if a translation is to “permit receptors to pass over the chasms of language and culture to comprehend, in so far as possible, the full implications of the original communication”; that is, to enable readers or hearers to understand as much as possible of the original meaning.

Summary

Since so many translations today use section headings, translators should consider transliterating the name Lazarus in the text of Lk 16.19-31, and explaining the meaning of the name in the section heading which is given to this parable. It does not matter if this makes the section heading long enough to require two or three lines. Various translations in major languages (such as *El Libro del Pueblo de Dios* and *Biblia de Jerusalén* in Spanish and *TOB* in French) occasionally use such long section headings.

Since the words “Cananaean” and “Zealot” have no meaning or possibly an incorrect meaning for many readers, these terms should be translated with a phrase which gives the meaning of the words.

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PROBLEMS IN AN OBSCURE PASSAGE:

Notes on Genesis 6.1-4

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The first four verses of Genesis chapter 6 is indeed a short text. Nevertheless, it is of great interest to readers of the Scriptures, and because of the problems it raises for interpretation, the passage intrigues biblical scholars and translators. Giving a picture of the world before the Great Flood, the brief notice reflects the narrator's view of early history, which seems to differ somewhat from the main stream of biblical faith. Furthermore, the brief text is loaded with obscure words and expressions – “sons of the Elohim”, “daughters of men”, *nephilim*, *gibborim* – whose meanings are still much disputed.