The translation experts working with the United Bible Societies have before them a clear priority which must not be concealed. It has appeared again and again between the lines of this article. The common language translation on the basis of dynamic equivalence seems to us the best for today for the following reasons: the vast majority of the people of Europe feel no urge to read literature and have no link with the churches and their traditional and specialized language. On the other hand, there is widespread and undeniable interest in the Bible. As Christians we are convinced that the Bible not only has a long history but, even today, can move people with a power as vital as when it was written, because God Himself uses it. And we do not think common language too banal and expressionless. Of course it must not level everything out and so become pale and colourless. Probably we have not yet had enough practice to make full use of it.

This article has had to deal with so many basic questions because the chief problem in Bible translating in Europe today does not lie in the major and minor difficulties of the text and its reproduction in another language. It is our traditions which create difficulties for us. Their great importance can bar our way so that we can no longer seek and find the necessary solutions for today. But when we do try to find these solutions, we make a surprising discovery: our questions are no different from those of the "Third World". When the aim is to make the Biblical message intelligible to people today, there are no specifically European problems.

KÁROLY PRÖHLE

SOME THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF BIBLE TRANSLATING (THE HUNGARIAN TRANSLATION)

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Readers of this journal will be interested to know that a very considerable amount of Bible translation work is being done in East Europe. The United Bible Societies will conduct a three-week seminar for East European translators in August 1971. Various consultations have been held in East Europe and the following article is related to a consultation on the revision of the Bible in the Hungarian language which was held in Budapest, Hungary, during November 1970. (*Editor*)

The Interpretation of The Word of God

We undertake the work of Bible translation with the conviction that the Holy Scriptures contain for us the message of God. Our work is but a small fraction of the permanent and untiring human activity which aims at removing the obstacles in the way of understanding by bridging over the difference of language through translation and interpretation. At the same

time, our work is also integral to the ministry of preaching as the text we interpret is the message which God himself sends to us.

To illustrate our task, I offer an example. Some years ago, one of our Hungarian machine factories built a special machine to be used in track maintenance. The function of the machine was to ram ballast under the railway sleepers. It had been built according to the specifications of the French model, but when they tried to put it to use, it did not work. Experts, including engineers and maintenance workers, held a meeting, and a documentary film was shown to demonstrate the original machine in operation. A keen-sighted engineer soon spotted the trouble: the size of the crushed stone of which the ballast was composed differed from what was used in Hungary. So the size was changed and the machine began to work perfectly. It turned out that the snag was due to inaccurate translation. The French language has a number of words to denote ballast, some of them specifying the size of the broken rocks used to build railway tracks. But the translator was not sufficiently familiar with French to note the difference, and his inaccurate rendering led to a technical failure. It was, then, the joint effort of the translator and the engineers that produced the desired result, the faultless operation of the machine.

It is obvious that we are in a similar situation, and since the text we translate is the Word of God, the expert skill of the translator must be supported by theological knowledge in order "to make the machine work" so that the message may reach Hungarian hearers, and indeed reach them as the message of God addressed to them. We do not mean that the special considerations and interests of theology should in any way restrain or predetermine the work of the translator, or impel him to put a certain interpretation on the text. Quite the contrary: it is precisely the theological interest that demands respect for the work of the translator, and it is theological sensitivity that makes the work of the translator effective.

In order to present the role of theology in translation I will discuss the three principles formulated to guide our work in Bible translating: accuracy, idiomatic translation and adaptation to the congregation.

Accuracy

The right theological conception of the Bible reckons with the historical nature of God's revelation which is proclaimed by it. The Bible is not a collection of timeless doctrines but a document which witnesses to the saving activity of God—a history which encompasses the life of mankind. We make use of linguistic and other scientific instruments of interpretation in order to understand as fully as possible the message of the Bible, because this is embedded in the most varied historical situations which reflect the original intention and aim of the message.

Theology, therefore, demands our respect for the historical nature of the text. It should be taken for granted that we use the best available text, that is, by and large, Kittel's edition of the Old Testament and the Greek New Testament edited by Nestlé and Aland. This decision, however, raises two problems. Firstly, the research into the development of the New Testament

text has produced a great many variant readings, and it is not possible at the moment to make definite decisions about some of them. Secondly, the Károli Revision of 1908 was prepared on the basis of the *Textus Receptus*, and this text differs to such an extent from the Nestlé-Aland edition of the Greek New Testament that even those relatively unfamiliar with the Bible will notice the difference. For this reason, in the instalments of our tentative edition, we used notes to indicate all the substantial differences, thereby also indicating the historical character of the basic text, as for instance in Luke 8:43; 10:42. It is desirable for such notes to be used in the new Bible translation also.

It also appears natural to us, from the theological viewpoint, to try to understand and interpret this oldest available text from the original historical situation. This emphasis on historicity precludes a word-for-word translation and also the rigid application of the principle of concordance. For we must not only realize that the same words, because of their historical situation which differs from ours, carry different meanings. We must also consider that, within the Bible and in relation to the history of revelation, the words and concepts too have their own history in the course of which their meaning changed. At the same time, the original text prohibits an arbitrary variation in our translation when the original shows a conscious consistency in the use of one and the same word in the same specific sense. Thus, for instance, the word *agapē*, with a single exception (Jude 12), is to be rendered by "love", this being the meaning of all the occurrences of the word. The word *sarx*, however, calls for a number of renderings: "body", "flesh" (Luke 24:29), "mortal" (1 Cor. 1:29, etc.), "men of my own race" (Rom. 11:14), and perhaps also "man" (John 1:14), "human nature", "sinful nature". etc. Where, however, the word *sarx* occurs in the same semantic context with the same meaning, denoting, for instance, the mortality of man, we consistently use the word *halandó* (mortal) in our translation.

Theology also impels us to adhere to the principle of historical accuracy with regard to the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. It would be a mistake either to increase or reduce the agreements and differences in the interest of a falsely interpreted theological principle. In comparing quotations, we accepted the actual situation: where there were exact quotations, we produced identical texts; where there were allusions to Old Testament texts, we tried to harmonize words and phrases. The principle of concordance, with respect to the relation between the two Testaments, should be applied with especial care when we translate words like these: grace, mercy, love, faithfulness, faith, sin, wickedness, commandment, law, salvation, redemption, deliverance. Care should be taken to use the word "love" (*ḥeseḏ*) in the proper passages and with the proper frequency in our Old Testament text, lest our O.T. translation should have a more pronounced New Testament character than the original. We must consider whether or not we should speak of "salvation" as well as "deliverance" in the O.T. (*yēša'*, *yᵉšû'āh*).

It is a well-known fact that the linguistic link between the two Testaments was established by the Septuagint. So we must give more attention to the Septuagint text in the future than we have done in the past. The rendering

of God's name by the word "Lord" is made possible by the Septuagint but total elimination of the name "Yahweh" might suggest disregard for the historical nature of revelation and thus mean a loss from the theological point of view. We should probably keep the word where it explicitly means God's name, as for instance in Ex. 9:16; 15:13 etc. While it would be a mistake arbitrarily to opt for renderings distant from New Testament thought (for instance, to translate *'ēḏāh* by "community" and not by "congregation", Psa. 111:1), a really accurate translation will also express the difference between the two Testaments.

From the viewpoint of theology it is of basic importance to realize that the historicity of the Word of God always implies a reference to a specific situation which is, so to speak, the target of its meaning. The appropriate simile for the Word of God is the sword which has both edge and point. To ignore this edge is to miss the essential message of the texts concerned. It is probably at this point that the work of historical research and linguistics and the work of theology are most closely joined. Let me give a few examples. The phrase "out of faith" in Rom. 1:17 is rather difficult to understand. One translation is: "he who is justified through faith shall live." But this bears such a marked doctrinal stamp that for this reason alone it hardly seems to be really accurate. Grammatically, the word order shows clearly that the phrase *ek pisteōs* is determined by the predicate. We note the same word order in the corresponding O.T. text which Paul, refusing here to follow the Septuagint, quotes according to the Hebrew original. Now we can take a further step by dividing the quotation into simple sentences: (1) One who is justified has faith. (2) He who has faith shall live. Yet the specific reference of our text to a specific historical situation is still missing. This becomes clear when we reconstruct the original situation. In view of the prevalence of wickedness, the just despair of their future. Thereupon comes the divine reply: "The just, if he believes, shall live!" or, still more sharply, "The just, if he believes, then shall live!"

In the phrase "obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5), the emphasis is on "faith". This phrase also has its historical edge which is, however, ignored in the translation in Today's English Version: "in order to lead people of all nations to believe and obey." For the edge or point of this phrase is its reference to a specific situation: parallel to Paul's mission, there is other missionary activity which is proclaiming obedience to Law, with circumcision. It is against this mission that Paul stresses that his call is to proclaim obedience which stems from faith. Quite characteristically, Paul writes this polemic in a style which radiates perfect poise and calmness. His diction here reminds one of the magnificent calm with which the author of the story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis disposes of the contemporary creation myths which are full of exciting descriptions of exciting struggles. Paul's reference to his specific situation is made in an emphatically simple style which must also be retained in the translation, for it would be a mistake to obscure the features of the original by an artificially lively style.

The historical character of the Bible also means that, in some cases, the translated text can only be understood in terms of a specific historical situation, and hence the meaning of the translated text is debatable. It is also in

the interest of theology that readers of the Bible see this clearly. Hence it is necessary to append notes which not only inform the reader about the original situation but also indicate that there are various ways of interpreting the text concerned.

Idiomatic Translation

No translator in his right senses would think of translating the Bible into a language other than what his readers actually understand. It is all the more surprising that, in our case, church people as well as writers have stood up for the full or partial retention of the Károli text. Without trying to analyze the motives behind this demand, we emphasize again that we translate the Holy Scriptures with the conviction that the Bible is the message of God for modern man. It is therefore a basic requirement of theology that the language into which the Bible is translated is the living Hungarian idiom of our time, and, as to the trend of linguistic development, our translation should rather be in the vanguard of linguistic progress than in the rearguard of archaic diction. A moderate degree of archaic diction can only be justified in passages where the original, too, unmistakably and consciously tries to reproduce the diction of bygone times.

Theoretically, the requirement of a high level of linguistic culture in the translated text is not a theological problem. Nevertheless we must deal with this question, since some have called for the use of a less cultured, vulgar idiom in the translation of the Bible, speaking of seaman's language or the language of the street. That is how some interpret the fact that the New Testament was not written in classical Greek but in the popular language of the time. Today, however, we must realize clearly that there are various levels of linguistic culture in the New Testament, and that even the lowest of these represents a common idiom which is above average, so that common people reading the New Testament writings for the first time did not feel that they were reading something trivial but rather something noble and sublime. Compared with its literary environment, the Old Testament represents, on the whole, a high literary level, while some parts of it are up to the highest standards of world literature. We are therefore justified in applying the standards of good literature in our Bible translation. If it is true that God, through faith, restores the true humanity of fallen man, then we must set up the requirement of a high-level and idiomatic translation in opposition to a depraved, distorted and slipshod language.

Yet, to achieve this aim, the help of writers and linguists seems indispensable. We should value their criticisms and assistance even when we subject some of their proposals for Hungarian renderings to the test of accuracy. They are right when they object, for example, to the translation: *Mivel sózzák meg*? But the right rendering is not *Mivel teszik sóssá*? ("There is no way of making it salty again") but *Mivel izesitik meg*? ("How do they give it taste?") and it is the latter which is an accurate translation of Luke 14:34. From the linguistic point of view, *Bizony mondom* might be preferable to *Igazán mondom*, but the latter seems to express the meaning of the original, which is "I say according to truth", or possibly, "True is what I say"

(Luke 4:25). *Ráesett a sor* is indeed impossible, but the suggested *rákerült a sor* misses the meaning of the original. The right translation is "he was chosen by lot" (Luke 1:9). These examples show that the work of linguistic experts in cooperation with translators is necessary and useful.

Within the limits of a truly idiomatic translation, theology should also affirm the requirement that the translation do justice to the great wealth and variety of both the form and the content of the Biblical message. The historical nature of the Bible is expressed by the fact that the Biblical contents are extremely varied, and include such specific forms as narrative, pithy saying, solemn hymn, animated dialogue, ardent prophecy and detailed interpretation of the Law. To level down all this would not only be wrong but also quite impossible. A quotation from one of the reviewers of Martin Buber's translation in the first instalment of our New Testament translation in 1965 has unfortunately caused a great deal of misunderstanding. At that time, as a protest against the free translations which had become popular, it was quite right to say that we could not introduce such elements of style into our translation as were unwarranted by the original. So we refrained from translating "he said" by "he replied", "he countered him", "he snapped back", which would give more variety of expression, yet would be without the warrant of the original. We retained the opening sentence of Luke's Gospel as a peculiarity of style, though we realized that modern Hungarian usage is rather averse to long sentences. There were cases when we had theological reasons for retaining the unity of long sentences. Thus, for instance, Matt. 28:19-20 speaks in a single sentence of the double act of making disciples, baptism and teaching, and even a semicolon is of no avail as it is only a typographic device. See for instance Today's English Version: "Go then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you."

It is in the interest of theology also to retain certain peculiarities of style in cases when the New Testament writers consciously use the stylistic elements of the Old Testament in order to contrast the Gospel with the Torah. This is suggested by the word "beginning" (with a reference to Genesis) in the first verses of the Gospel. Thus theology would call for the preservation of stylistic elements peculiar to the Torah. In the final analysis, what we are saying can be summed up in the following quotation: "If, in transferring from one language to another the content and connotation of the message, one can also carry over something of the form, one should do so".[1]

Special consideration is called for in certain strange-looking constructions which may have to be retained in our translation in the interests of theology. One such case is the preservation of the passive voice when the subject of the action concerned is God himself. If we substitute active voice in our translation and name the subject implied by the original passive voice, then the whole character of the statement is changed. The use of *—ódik—*in Hungarian (the usual way of expressing the action of a general subject) is

[1] E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 1969, p. 137.

not satisfactory for, in this case, no Hungarian-speaking person would think of God as the subject of the action concerned. On the other hand, the use of passive voice was originally not at all alien to the spirit of the Hungarian language, and in cases where the passive voice still survives in the modern idiom it is especially suited to suggest the religious background of the statement and the divine subject implied. To be sure, we must review our translation and retain the passive voice only in cases where it is indispensable and can be tolerated. But most of the objections in this matter were made by our linguistic critics to the sentence *Megmondatott Jeremiás próféta által* (Matt. 2:17), who then proposed the translation, *Megmondta Jeremiás próféta.* This is not acceptable, since the preposition *dia* in the original does not indicate the subject (*hupo* would do this) but rather the medium, the instrument of an action: "through", and thus the sentence implies that the message proclaimed by the prophet is not his own invention; he is but the mediator, the herald of a divine message. Perhaps the words *révén* or *utján* ("through", "in the way of", "by the instrumentality of") would render the original meaning which is missed by the proposed *Megmondta Jeremiás próféta.* (Jeremiah the prophet said.)

Another problem is raised by untranslated Hebrew words in the original. Our traditional translation has so far preserved the words "Hallelujah", "Hosanna" and "Maranatha" in their original forms. But now there has been general surprise that in the instalments of our tentative edition the word "Amen" at the beginning of sayings is left untranslated. Modern scholarship informs us that it was a unique habit of Jesus to begin sentences in this way, and that this is why the word was retained in the Greek text where it was no less strange than in Hungarian. But it must have sounded strange and curious even in Aramaic. Historical accuracy, therefore, would commend its preservation in the translated text. Since, however, the translation *Bizony mondom* ("verily I say") has been traditional for 400 years as a characteristic Biblical expression, we can hardly break with it.

Special care must be taken with the rendering of the original figures of speech, lest the argument of linguistic purism ("no person whose mother tongue is Hungarian would ever speak that way"), should cause the loss of what is meaningful in the original. It is a linguistic fact that peoples learn a lot from each other, in matters of language as in other ways, and they borrow figures of speech from one another if those reflect the common experience of mankind. While having regard for ethnic peculiarities, the Gospel nonetheless maintains the horizon of universal humanity, and there are many figures of speech which, because of the widespread use of the Bible, have become common treasures of mankind. Many Biblical figures of speech are designed to make the message conveyed stick for a lifetime. For instance, "to devour the widows' houses" (Luke 20:47) is a robust yet intelligible expression, but it loses its force if it is rendered "rob them of their homes" (Today's English Version). "To taste death" is certainly strange, but, especially in its negative form "shall not taste death" is forcibly descriptive. I remember the lasting impression I received when it was explained to me what was meant by the Biblical phrase "you will heap burning coals on his head" (Rom. 12:20). Undeniably, the expression suggests torture fit

to break the resistance even of the most hardened criminal[2] but we could hardly find another metaphor of similar power to express the convicting power of love. At first glance, we might find the phrase "yoke-fellow" (Phil. 4:3) strange, but it becomes most meaningful as soon as we discover in it the primitive Christian reference to a saying of Jesus (Matt. 11:29), and then the translation "fellow-servant" appears rather feeble. With respect to the Old Testament also, we should consider most carefully the retention or exchange of such figurative expressions, lest we rob the Bible of its power of expression.

Hence a text that will meet the requirements of theology and idiomatic translation should be the joint work of linguistic and theological experts.

Adaptation to The Congregation

As long as we are dealing with the general principles of translation, we may be satisfied to sum up our requirements as follows: we must produce a clear Hungarian text which a man of average education could understand as though he was reading the original. But, from the theological point of view, we should also give special consideration to the fact that the Bible is the book of the church, and hence our translation is also prepared for the church, both for congregations and for individual believers. A congregation, however, is not a homogeneous unit, but a community composed of people of varying age-groups, education and tradition. On the other hand, as we have already pointed out, the Bible is not homogeneous either, but is a collection of writings with a variety of contents and literary levels. Hence one can hardly produce a translation which, in all its parts, will satisfy everybody. In this situation, we should soberly keep to the centre of literary standards—with a view to the future development of the idiom. This is a rather generally phrased requirement which calls for a number of qualifications.

The first translation of the Bible, as a rule, has decisive significance in the church history of every people. Such a translation establishes for a long time the ecclesiastical use of certain key concepts, and lays the foundations of the ecclesiastical language of the people concerned. This linguistic tradition is then perpetuated by the congregations by their liturgical use and by their knowledge of the Bible. This fact sets strict limits to the possibility of a radically new Bible translation. There is a great deal of truth in the statement that the test of a Bible translation is whether non-Christians understand it.[3] A radically new translation might appeal to secularized people and yet become a problem for the faithful, Bible-reading believer. This consideration counsels modesty and moderation, in the sense that we should only change the traditional text where we can produce what is obviously and convincingly better than what our fathers produced. Moreover, it also counsels patience, and the decision that the new translation be offered, for the time being, rather as a new opportunity of coming nearer to

[2] Nida and Taber, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

[3] Nida and Taber, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

the meaning of the Biblical message than as an official text for compulsory use.

At the same time, the traditionalists in the congregations cannot hinder the work whose necessity is grounded in the preaching ministry, namely, the work of keeping our translation up-to-date. From the theological point of view, we emphasize especially the fact that the congregation is not only a tradition-bound community interested solely in the preservation of that tradition, but also a community desirous of learning new and strange things, and quite willing to accept what is new in a Bible translation. Living in a society of learners, we should naturally extend the Hungarian proverb about the good priest who should keep on his studies until his death: the parishioners, too, should keep on learning. Let us think of our young people, many of whom are conversant with the literary classics and have some historical familiarity with the age in which the Bible came into being. They take it for granted that, while reading, they must learn new words and new concepts and penetrate strange worlds. Therefore when we, for instance, try to deal with Biblical measures and monetary units, we must realize that even a secondary school student would sense the anachronism of finding the metric system in the Bible and would in fact find this rather strange, since he is accustomed to meet both foreign and ancient measures and coinages in the books he reads. Therefore, as translators, we can safely count on the willingness of our readers to learn. But, to assist the learning process, we should provide with the Bible the necessary historical and geographical information in the form of notes, explanations and maps.

If we, therefore, think of the illustration in terms of which we should keep on kneading and simplifying the message until it meets the "channel capacity" of the congregation,[4] then we are well advised not to fancy this "channel capacity" as a cast-iron tube, but rather as something made of elastic, so that we can and must widen it. We must refuse to suppose that the channel capacity of the congregation at any given time is unalterable, and hence that it is to this unalterable fact that we should accommodate the message of the Bible. To strike the right balance is, of course, a very delicate task which calls for a high degree of perceptiveness.

Comparison with the Scientific Principles of Translation

In summing up what has been said, we can state that our work, both in theory and practice, is on the whole in accordance with the modern principles of the science of Bible translating, as demonstrated among others by the new English translation *Good News for Modern Man* (Today's English Version). To the extent that we succeed in smoothing out the uneven portions and in correcting the mistakes in our translation, we hope that the new Hungarian Bible will not only meet the internationally recognized standards of Bible translating, but will also build up our congregations and churches by the right interpretation of God's message for us.

[4] Nida and Taber, *op. cit.*, p. 186.