

particular situations. The peculiar “mix” of each translation project in an area will have to be taken into account. What is the extent of Catholic participation in the particular project? What are the expected percentages of Protestant and Catholic readers? What is the relative importance of the European translations as opposed to the local African languages familiar to the potential readers of the new translation? When all these factors are carefully weighed, the translators should be able to come up with a solution that is particularly suited to their situation.

Another possible solution for French-speaking areas might be simply to follow the TOB in an attempt to be forward-looking and ecumenical, but it is doubtful whether very many people will be ready to accept such a solution at this point in time.

Whatever tradition of chapter and verse numbering is followed in a new translation, the reader can be made aware of the other alternatives where they exist, if this is considered necessary. This may be done by means of footnotes (as in some editions of the RSV), marginal references (as in the *Bible de Jérusalem*), or a table of correspondences in an introduction.

ABBREVIATIONS

MT	Masoretic Text, the standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament
LXX	Septuagint, the text of an early translation of the Old Testament in Greek
KJV	King James Version (Authorized Version)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
NEB	New English Bible
TEV	Today's English Version
NIV	New International Version
FC	Français Courant (Common Language French)
TOB	Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible (Ecumenical French translation)
NAB	New American Bible

RAYMOND R. RICKARDS

GENESIS 15: AN EXERCISE IN TRANSLATION PRINCIPLES

Dr. Raymond Rickards is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Suva, Fiji.

INTRODUCTION

This passage appears to be a simple, straightforward narrative with a fairly clear message. Verses 1–6 are concerned with the important question of Abram's succession. His call, first referred to in chapter 12, was accompanied by the divine promise that he would be the forefather of a great nation. But because he continues childless, Abram's hopes of fulfilling this call seem groundless (verses 2 and 3). Also, because he does not have a son, there is his personal anxiety about not being able to be laid to rest properly by his children (verse 15). God's promise that he will have an heir now gives Abram the assurance he needs about both these matters (verses 4, 5, 15).

The rest of the chapter (verses 7–20) places these important questions within a broader setting. The nation that will descend from Abram will be established in its own extensive territory as described in detail by the Lord (verse 18). And the Lord's promise to bring all this to pass is sealed by the making of a covenant between the Lord and Abram (verses 7–10 and 18–21).

Because of the prominent place Abram plays in the whole biblical history, this chapter is of key importance, and the message it carries should come through clearly to the reader. Yet, when we study it in older translations such as the Revised Standard Version, we see that there are many serious problems of understanding that confront the average reader today. A translator using the RSV as his source text needs to grapple with these realistically if he is to render the message of the passage in a meaningful way into the language of his readers.

What follows is in two parts. In the first part we will discuss some of the points where the RSV could cause difficulties of understanding. Then in the second part we will suggest a translation into simple, current English which seeks to remove some of these problems, and which may be helpful as a basis for translators who have to translate this chapter into their own language.

PROBLEMS

Verse 1

“And after these things the word of the Lord came to Abram . . .”

The idiomatic expression “the word . . . came” could cause problems if translated literally into certain languages. How can a word come? It can be spoken to or heard by someone, but to say that it comes sounds strange. It must be realized that this is a biblical idiom which simply means that the Lord spoke or said. It is the equivalent of the expression “the Lord said” in Gen 12.1, for instance. A translation which has “the Lord spoke to Abram” would be doing full justice to the Hebrew meaning.

“Fear not . . .”

To what does this refer? To Abram being frightened about God's appearance to him in a vision? Or to Abram's concern about his childless future? The whole context indicates that it is the latter. So a good translation should remove this ambiguity and make the meaning clear.

“I am your shield . . .”

This figurative expression is found in many places in the OT (for example Dt 33.29; Ps 3.3; 5.12; 28.7; Prov 30.5). It refers to divine protection. But literally translated into some languages, especially those where shields are not regarded as important, the meaning is lost. It may be necessary, therefore, to express the meaning of these words in plain language.

“your reward shall be very great”

The term “reward” in many languages suggests a prize or payment for some worthy action or quality. But there is no suggestion in the text of anything good that Abram has done or is going to do, so deserving a reward. The reference is actually to Abram's future security and prosperity. Further,

the form "your reward shall be great" is difficult in that the person who gives the reward is not named. But clearly God is the giver and this should be brought out clearly.

Verse 2

"But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless . . . ?'"

The meaning behind this is not that Abram is asking God to tell him exactly what material wealth he is going to receive, but rather that he is questioning the whole point of God prospering him at all, seeing he has no son to inherit his wealth and continue the family heritage. Gen 13.2 tells us that Abram was already very rich. Abram therefore wants to know the reason for further material prosperity if he has no son to inherit his possessions.

"and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus"

This verse is puzzling because we are not told who this Eliezer of Damascus is, or why he in particular will be Abram's heir. However, in ancient Middle-Eastern custom, when there was no direct heir, an indirect one, who could be either a relation or even an outsider, would become the legal inheritor. In this case, it seems that this Eliezer of Damascus, a slave born within Abram's household (see verse 3), is to be the indirect heir because there is no direct heir.

Verse 3

Here information already given in verse 2 is repeated. In many languages such repetition is needless. Therefore, a restructuring of verses 2 and 3 is needed.

Verse 4

"And behold, the word of the Lord came to him . . ."

The same point made about the opening words of verse 1 applies here. A translation such as, "Then the Lord answered Abram . . ." would be justifiable.

"This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir."

Although this rendering is adequate, it misses something in the way of impact on the reader. The style and expression used here should bring out the importance of what is being said.

Verse 5

"And he brought him outside and said . . ."

The pronouns "he" and "him" are ambiguous. One of the basic rules of good translation is that the participants should be clearly identified. A rendering such as "Then the Lord took Abram outside and said, . . ." would fulfil this requirement.

"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them."

The style of this is awkward and unnatural. A simpler and more natural rendering would be, "Look at the sky and try to count the stars."

"Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'"

Again, the English style is odd, and the pronouns can be ambiguous too. A better translation would be, "You will have just as many descendants as that!"

Verse 6

"And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Once more, the pronouns in the second half of the sentence are ambiguous. More seriously, its meaning is very hard to understand. Although the verse is used in the NT as a proof-text for the doctrine of justification by faith, (Rom 4.9 and 22; Gal 3.6; Jas 2.23), it must be translated here in the light of its own context, not that of the NT. The temptation for the translator to render the OT according to the theology of the NT is very real, but it must be resisted strongly. The context would seem to demand a translation something like this: "And Abram believed this promise, so the Lord considered Abram's faith to be very worthy."

Verse 7

"And he said to him, . . ."

The remarks already made about identification of participants apply again here.

"I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans"

In many languages a clarifying phrase like "in the land" may need to be inserted before "of the Chaldeans".

Verse 8

"But he said, 'O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?'"

The force of the question can be brought out better by such a rendering as: "At this Abram asked, 'Lord God, how can I be certain it will be mine?'"

Verse 9

"He said to him, . . ."

It is more natural to say "So the Lord replied . . ."

"Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."

These creatures are related to the agreement about to be made between the Lord and Abram. Although the word "covenant" is not mentioned until verse 18, the agreement which is part of the covenant begins with verse 9. This ought to be made clear in verse 9 by the inclusion of such words as "Let us make a solemn agreement. As a sign of it, bring me . . ." This in turn will make verse 18 more meaningful. The repetition three times of "three years old" is awkward and unnecessary. A translation such as "a heifer, a she-goat, and a ram, each three years old . . ." overcomes the problem.

Verse 10

“And he brought him all these, cut them in two and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.”

The problem arises as to why Abram did all this when the Lord had simply instructed him to bring the creatures. The translation should try to make it clear that Abram's actions were all in accordance with the custom of making covenants in his Eastern culture. The Hebrew term usually translated “make a covenant” in English is literally “cut a covenant”, which explains why the carcasses were cut. The way in which they were cut is not exactly clear, but they were probably split down the middle, that is lengthwise. In those languages which do not have a general word for cutting, it may be necessary to use the verb which means “cut lengthwise”.

Verse 11

“And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.”

This is adequate, although a slightly different rendering could be “Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them off.”

Verse 12

“As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram . . .”

How can we reconcile this with verse 5 where the stars shining in the sky would suggest that it was already night? The answer is that we cannot, and we should not try to do so. However, there is no point in exaggerating the discrepancy. All we can do is to translate the meaning of the text as it stands.

“and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him”

If Abram were in a deep sleep, how could he be frightened? Was this a nightmare? Further, what was the great darkness, and what is meant by it falling upon him, since if he was asleep he would not be conscious of the dark? It must be admitted that such questions are not really important, for in this verse we are in the realm of the “numinous”, that great mystery of man's fear and dread in the presence of the holy God. Although it overstates the point, the *Living Bible's* “a vision of terrible foreboding, darkness, and horror” brings out this mysterious element. A simpler rendering might be “was possessed by a terrible fear”. (Speiser, in the Anchor Bible series, gives: “a deep, dark dread descended upon him”.)

Verse 13

“Then the Lord said to Abram, ‘Know for a surety . . .’”

This phrase is not current in common English, as is also the case with “sojourners” and “oppressed” in the same verse. The whole sentence needs to be put into simpler English.

Verse 14

“But I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.”

This can be rendered more clearly and simply, as for instance: “At the end

of that time, I will punish the nation whose slaves they have been. And then they will leave, taking away with them much wealth.”

Verse 15

“As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.”

The term “go to your fathers in peace” is an idiom which probably referred originally to being buried honourably in a family burial ground (see Gen 25.8–10; Tobit 14.10). This meaning should be brought out in the translation.

Verse 16

“And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

This verse has several difficulties. First, it seems that it would follow more naturally straight after verse 14. As it stands it breaks the proper order of the narrative. A restructuring of verses 15 and 16 to rearrange the order is desirable. Secondly, the term “fourth generation” is ambiguous. The Hebrew word can mean “duration” or “age span”. The usual rendering of “generation” (KJV, RSV, NEB, Jerusalem Bible, Living Bible) is only secondary. Although it is not absolutely certain what the term means here, a reasonable assumption in the context would be to take it as referring to the 400 years of verse 13. A third problem has to do with the last half of the verse. It is difficult to understand both in itself and also in its relation to the first half. The translation should make it clear that the Amorites were the inhabitants of Canaan before the Israelites arrived, and that their iniquity would be punished by the Lord through the invasion of their land by the Israelites.

Verse 17

“And when the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.”

In Akkadian texts, a smoking fire pot and flaming torch are recorded in relation to magical practices. In this biblical text, they probably symbolize the presence of the Lord, but this is not at all certain. In the face of the uncertainty, a translation can do little to clarify the bare facts. All it can do is make it clear that the fire pot and the torch passed between the separated pieces of the carcasses.

Verse 18

“On that day . . .”

This could be confusing if rendered literally, because it was now night, not day-time. It is better to take this as a simple connective and render it by “Then . . .”

“The Lord made a covenant with Abram . . .”

Under verse 9, we suggested that the solemn agreement between the Lord and Abram began at that point. If that is so, then verse 18 ought to be translated as the conclusion of the agreement.

“from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates”

It would be clearer to make this a new sentence beginning “It will extend from . . .”

Verses 19–21

“the land of the Kenites . . .”

These last verses should begin with “and will include the territories of the tribes of . . .”.

SUGGESTED TRANSLATION

1 Then the Lord said to Abram, “Do not worry, Abram, about your future. I will look after you so that you will prosper greatly.”

2 But Abram replied, “Lord God, what is the point of my being prosperous, seeing I have no children. ³ “Because you have given me no direct heir, one of the slaves born in my household, Eliezer of Damascus, will inherit everything I possess.”

4 So the Lord answered Abram, “This shall not be so. No one but your very own son will inherit your possessions.” ⁵ Then the Lord took Abram outside and said, “Look at the sky and try to count the stars. You will have just as many descendants as that!” ⁶ And Abram believed this promise, so the Lord considered Abram’s faith to be very worthy.

7 Then the Lord said to Abram, “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur in the land of the Chaldeans, in order to give you this land as your very own.”

8 At this, Abram asked, “Lord God, how can I be certain it will be mine?”

9 So the Lord replied, “Let us make a solemn agreement. As a sign of it, bring me a heifer, a she-goat and a ram, each three years old, as well as a turtledove and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰ So Abram brought all these things to the Lord. According to the custom of making an agreement, he cut them in half down the middle, placing one half of each opposite the other half. But he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹ Birds of prey tried to swoop down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them off.”

12 As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep and was possessed by a terrible fear.

13 Then the Lord said to Abram, “You can be sure of this; Your descendants will live in a foreign land where they will suffer as slaves for four hundred years. ¹⁴ “But at the end of that period I will punish the nation whose slaves they have been. And then they will leave, taking away with them much wealth. ¹⁵⁻¹⁶ “After the four hundred years, they will invade this land, for by that time the wicked Amorites who dwell here will be ready to be punished. As for you, you shall die in peace at a ripe old age, and be given an honoured burial with your ancestors.”

17 Now it happened that, when the sun had fully set and it was dark, a smoking pot of fire and a flaming torch passed between the separated pieces of the carcasses. ¹⁸⁻²¹ Then the Lord concluded the solemn agreement with Abram by saying, “I will give this land to your descendants. It will extend

from the River of Egypt to the great River Euphrates, and will include the territories of the tribes of the Kenites, and the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaims, Amorites, Canaanites, Girschashites and the Jebusites."

EUGENE H. GLASSMAN

LETTER TO A FRIEND

Mr. Eugene Glassman is a Field Translations Advisor for the UBS based in Tehran, Iran.

What follows is really a personal letter, but it is being printed here as an article because of the good comment it contains about translation. It has actually been somewhat revised and expanded from the form in which it was written, for the sake of readers who did not see the letter to which it is a reply.—Editor.

Tehran, IRAN

Date

Dear _____,

Thank you very much for your interesting and thoughtful, not to say concerned, letter regarding my translation work. If it were possible to talk over these things in person I could explain my position more easily than trying to write it all out in a letter. In fact, there is far too much to write; but I will still make the effort to cover at least the main objections which you have raised with regard to the United Bible Societies' newest translation into English.

While I am now working for the UBS, I was taken on as a Translations Advisor in West Asia, not as their defense attorney. It is not, therefore, my responsibility to try either to prove or disprove any of the allegations that you have levelled at their new translation, "Today's English Version", the NT of which is called "Good News for Modern Man". As with every other translation which I have ever seen—and I personally own quite a number of them—there are good things about TEV (at least, things which I like) and also some things which I do not care for. I have heard and read many criticisms regarding it, including some of the published literature on the subject. While some of the points raised may be legitimate, some of them strike me as nit-picking. I do not mean this last remark to refer to *you*, however; but by way of getting into the subject let me give you some examples of what I mean.

Some of the critics I have heard or read find fault with the TEV because it uses quotation marks while the King James Version does not. They say, probably rightly, that this puts the translator in the position of an interpreter since he has to decide, for example, whether the quotation in John 3 stops at verse 13, 15, 16, 19 or 21. Whether the quotation marks are there or not, however, the *reader* has to decide this since there is no infallible way of knowing. Incidentally, in the nature of the case every translator has to be an