

FROM WISDOM SAYINGS TO WISDOM TEXTS, PART I

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Translating popular wisdom texts

The rendering of wisdom sentences from Ancient Israel into one of the languages of south-eastern Africa raises a number of interesting issues of method, style and interpretation. The following notes, arising from local translation experience, are offered in the hope that they might ring a bell elsewhere, notably in Africa.

The source material under consideration is limited to the so-called older sections of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs.¹ The proposed task is to translate these wisdom texts, originally oral sayings rooted in Israelite clan wisdom, for a constituency which has access today to a published corpus of proverbs and proverbial expressions.² In that target culture, however, traditional oral sapience, now entering the era of electronic media and literacy, has remained surprisingly articulate.

Preliminary views on the form, function and content of popular wisdom sayings give the present study its necessary perspective, but attention focuses on the oral-formulaic features of these sayings, particularly density, sound patterns and arrangements. In a second part, a series of seven Hebrew aphorisms on wealth and poverty will be analysed and compared with a selection of Tsonga proverbs on the same theme. A final section will draw the conclusions of this comparison and suggest some implications for the translation of biblical proverbs today.

Similarities

The broad resemblance between the source texts of old Hebrew wisdom and recorded collections of proverbs in an African target culture is bound to attract the attention of Bible translators. One is obviously dealing here with a common and widespread literary genre. Israel's sages are known to have shared popular wisdom sayings with their Egyptian, Babylonian and perhaps also their North-Semitic neighbours. Since the classical studies of Erman, Gressman, Humbert and Oesterley in the 1920s on the international character of wisdom statements and admonitions, Old Testament scholarship has never failed to deal with the interdependence of wisdom literary forms and themes in the Ancient Near East, while also acknowledging the distinctive contribution of Hebrew sages to sapiential traditions.³

Proverbs as a traditional verbal art are likewise found all over Africa, with a

1 Proverbs 10.1–22.16; 25.1–29.27.

2 H. P. Junod, *Vuthari bya Vatsonga—The Wisdom of the Tsonga-Shangana People*, 3rd ed. Johannesburg: Sasavona, 1978.

3 W. McKane, *Proverbs: a new approach*. London: SCM Press 1970, 51–208; J. L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*. Atlanta: John Knox Press 1981, 12–25.

few exceptions noted by Finnegan.⁴ Their thematic coherence has been stressed and abundantly documented, also by Finnegan.⁵

From a *formal* point of view, wisdom sayings are characterized by their relative fixity, their poetical qualities of rhythm, sound effects and imagery, their specific organisation. They are also open to endless applications, in repeated performances fitting diverse situations. Such comparable features seem to point to basically similar *functions* of the proverbial and aphoristic verbal art, in Israel and South-East Africa. This functional parallelism includes education, legal pronouncements, rhetoric, formal entertainment and, last but not least, pure verbal delight.

The recurrent *themes* of popular wisdom utterances also appear remarkably constant. In one way or another, all these sayings express an attempt at “coping with reality”, or even more simply “the ability to cope”.⁶ They compare human and animal behaviour. They formulate basic life-experiences in man’s dealings with nature, in proper social relationships, in the sapiential demands of scribal tasks or court situations. They presuppose trust in an overall cosmic order, with varying degrees of religious overtone. Crenshaw writes as follows on the consistent concerns of near-eastern sages:

Wise men and women address common problems, whether the dangers of adultery, the perils of the tongue, the hazards of strong drink, the enigma of undeserved sufferings, the inequalities of life, or the finality of death.⁷

As for the very wide use of proverbs in Africa, Finnegan has this to say:

They really occur on all occasions where language is used for communication, either as an art or as a tool, i.e. on every sort of occasion imaginable.⁸ They are effective in a whole range of ways of life and in literature. Their literary significance emerges not only in the beauty of words and forms, their sense of detachment and generalisation, and their connection with other genres of artistic expression, but also in the aptness and perceptiveness with which they are used in an actual context.⁹

In other words, proverbs in Africa do not only embody an ancient tradition of wisdom. They also function today as a living verbal art, as shown by their enduring popularity among the Tsonga-speaking people.

Differences

In spite of these obvious similarities, and the formal, functional and thematic coherence of popular wisdom materials, Bible translators cannot hope for an easy transfer of Hebrew aphorisms into an African language such as Tsonga. Cultures widely separated in time and space may share a common literary genre, but this of course does not mean that they will use identical verbal tools, even less deliver a uniform message, in line with their sapiential heritage.

4 Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press 1970, 389.

5 Op. cit., 403ff.

6 Kenworth, quoted by J. L. Crenshaw, ed., *Studies in ancient Israelite Wisdom*. New York: Ktav 1976, 4.

7 Op. cit. (1981) 18.

8 Op. cit. 418.

9 Op. cit. 424f.

One of the main differences between Hebrew and Tsonga wisdom sentences lies in their respective degree of “orality” or “oral-based characteristics”, as defined by Ong in his recent, thought-provoking book.¹⁰ The carefully constructed texts of ancient Israelite wisdom are often thought to have grown out of prolonged contacts with the far older literary traditions of Egypt and Babylon. In contrast, the first printed collection of Tsonga wisdom sayings is hardly fifty years old. Tsonga proverbs are therefore situated far closer in time to pure oral art forms, or “primary orality”, than biblical aphorisms. In spite of the modern impact of mass literacy and formal education, of writing and printing, of radio and television, in spite also of a fast-expanding published literature in their respective vernaculars, Tsonga-speaking people and their south-eastern African neighbours continue to use oral popular sayings every day. For them, these utterances offer a source of spontaneous, repeatedly tested life-wisdom, as opposed to a text-based school wisdom, such as the one reflected in the balanced sentences of Hebrew sages. Boadi¹¹ wonders, with good reason, whether even the most “dynamic” version of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs can ever hope to compete in popularity with the current oral sapience of an African language.

This does not of course imply any value judgement on Tsonga and Hebrew wisdom documents. It simply makes the point that Tsonga materials should carry far more characteristics of oral sapience than their Hebrew parallels. This means also that we should look for signs of oral-based thoughts and expressions in the Old Testament wisdom texts, as proof of their popular origins and, presumably, of their persistent oral context, at the time of Solomon and his successors.

Dorson and Finnegan¹² have rightly criticized the romantic approach to oral art, as if the work of a naturally gifted ancestral folk would sound simpler, nobler, more genuine, than the literary products of predominantly chirographic and typographic cultures, “spoilt” by civilization. The same scholars also criticize the opposite, evolutionistic view of folk art, considered as rather awkward or backward, naive, primitive, archaic, not quite at the level of subsequent sophistication, especially in the proverb genre. One can easily detect this biased evolutionistic approach in some of the early wisdom studies, particularly when they tried to assess the role of popular clan wisdom on the formation of Hebrew sapiential texts. More on this below.

One could note in passing the subtle derogatory connotation attached to the terms “illiterate” or “pre-literate”, as if, with the crucial advent of writing, languages would suddenly discard their basic oral nature and cease to quote, apply, re-interpret, even slightly modify their traditional wisdom utterances, or

10 W. L. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*. New York: Methuen 1982.

11 L. A. Boadi, ‘The Language of the Proverb in Akan,’ in *African Folklore*, ed. R. M. Dorson, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1972, 183ff.

12 R. M. Dorson (ed.) *Folklore in the modern world*. The Hague: Mouton 1978, 11f. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: its nature, significance and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977, 30ff.

even create altogether new ones. On the other hand, no one would deny the usefulness and the indispensable aid of printed collections of proverbs. Without these compilations – and despite their shortcomings – much of the traditional proverb lore in south-eastern Africa and elsewhere would probably be lost, or difficult to reach. In other words, literacy is an irreversible and highly desirable process, which “restructures consciousness”.¹³ It has obviously a great potential for the preservation and fresh diffusion of wisdom traditions. Yet the fact remains that genuine proverbs must be seen basically as the products and the tools of a living oral art.

Another formal difference between Tsonga and Hebrew wisdom materials should be underlined. The older sections of the Book of Proverbs are composed almost exclusively of *aphorisms*, namely wisdom sentences in the shape of distichs containing statements or admonitions with a clear prudential or moral message. They do carry metaphors, similes and other figures of speech, but this imagery is interpreted in a firm and specific way; it has a fixed application. The meaning of wisdom sentences is therefore usually plain, literal and direct; it is spelt out in the sentences themselves.¹⁴

On the other hand, the *proverbs* of popular wisdom have, according to McKane,

a special kind of concreteness in virtue of which their meaning is open to the future and can be divined again and again in relation to a situation which calls forth the proverb as apt comment . . . The proverb may initially present a barrier to understanding, but when it is intuited, it throws a brilliant light on the situation which it fits.¹⁵

In other words, proverbs such as those of the Tsonga people are not only signalled by a high degree of figurative expressions, mostly metaphors and similes, or by poetical characteristics of density, sound effects, rhythm and special arrangements, which they share with aphorisms and poetry in general. According to McKane’s useful definition, they should also prove far more open to new interpretations and fresh applications than biblical aphorisms.¹⁶

Published proverbs are like stuffed birds in a museum, with lifeless bills, rigid claws, faded feathers; they have been deprived of their songs, their love dances, their migrations. To appreciate their true beauty, one should observe them alive, hear their concerts at dawn, watch them when they build their nests, catch them in flight. Likewise, proverbs must be “caught” as they come out of the mouth of a skilled orator (the “winged words” of Homer). The same difference exists between a collection of butterflies in a glass case, and fluttering in the

13 Ong, op. cit. 78ff.

14 McKane, op. cit. 22f, 138f.

15 Op. cit. 23.

16 For other definitions of the literary nature of proverbs, see Finnegan, op. cit. 1970, 389-425; R. D. Abrahams, ‘Proverbs and proverbial expressions’, in R. M. Dorson (ed.) *Folklore and Folklife*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1972, 183-191, with an extensive bibliography on Proverb Literature; J. M. Thomson, *The Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel*. The Hague: Mouton 1974, 18ff.; Crenshaw, op. cit. (1981) 67ff.

breeze at the edge of a green forest, surrounded by the rural fragrance and the sounds of a sunny spring afternoon.

Naturalness

Similarities and differences between Hebrew and Tsonga popular sapience bring into focus the question of naturalness in the translation of such material. Since proverbs form part of a living verbal art, particularly in an African receptor culture, Bible translators are likely to look for the specific formal resources which could be utilized in order to render the biblical text of the Book of Proverbs in a natural way. As when translating the Psalms, they will be keen to follow Peacock's advice, and be

... alert for ways to build poetic language back into (their) translation.¹⁷

They will soon realise the following facts:

a) One is dealing here with poetical language, at the biblical source as well as in the target culture and its wisdom genre. Proverbs and aphorisms *are* poetry, although of a special kind.¹⁸

b) Since languages tend to correspond even less in poetry than in prose, the limitations and losses inherent in the translation of poetry can be expected in the translation of proverbs, i.e. loss of Hebrew sound effects; the need to transform, replace or give up imagery; changes in rhythmical patterns, in syntactical arrangements, etc.

c) As already noted, wisdom sentences constitute a form of poetry best suited for an *oral* type of communication, for oral functions such as conversations and verbal games in the home, dialogues between a teacher and his pupils, interaction between a speaker and his audience. Wisdom sayings, stored in the memory of many, are therefore largely predictable, stereotyped, unchangeable, formulaic, like idioms and riddles. The wit and art of an individual sage cannot change them at will; art and wit will be manifested only, but significantly, in the apt quotation, the proper usage, the correct intonation, the striking contemporary application of an ageless sapience. Consequently, a new version of the biblical Book of Proverbs into one of the south-eastern African languages must take the predominantly oral context of the target wisdom into consideration.

d) The traditional form of aphoristic or proverbial sayings is semantically important; it carries much of the latter's meaning. A typical Tsonga proverb will, for instance, be announced by a special "proverb marker" such as:

<i>Va khale</i>	<i>va vurile</i>	<i>va te ...</i>
Those of old	they have spoken	they said ...
<i>Va khale</i>	<i>va vurisile</i>	<i>va ku ...</i>
Those of old	they said the truth	they say ...
<i>Va ri ...</i>		
People say ...		
<i>Ku ni xivuriso lexi nge ...</i>		
There is that proverb which says ...		

17 H. F. Peacock, *A Translator's Guide to Selected Psalms*. New York: UBS 1981, 1.

18 Finnegan, *op. cit.* (1970) 395, 402, 420.

Such phrases introduce the actual saying, in its specific oral-based verbal form. Both marker and fixed formula convey the meanings of “traditional authority”, “respect for the ancestors” (this core of the traditional religion), “precious life-experience”. The aptly quoted proverb may announce irony, humour, political acumen, oblique criticism. Normally, some of the “niceties” of poetical language should be sacrificed in translation, for the sake of content.¹⁹ In the case of proverbs, however, it seems advisable to treat the specific formal features of that genre as meaningful and indispensable, in the reconstruction process.

e) As formal characteristics of poetry in general, TAPOT mentions *unity* (consistency of theme and imagery); *novelty* (fresh expressions rather than clichés); *complexity* (multilayered parallelism); *compression* (very dense and economical language with little redundancy); *simplicity* (language in kernel or near-kernel forms).²⁰

The crucial item in this list, as far as the translation of wisdom texts is concerned, seems to be novelty, or the lack thereof, for it is the only mark of poetical language which proverbs apparently do not share with poetry. What distinguishes proverbs from poems is the formulaic, cliché-like, predictable *fixity* of the former, as against the original, unpredictable, unfamiliar nature of the latter.

f) With these facts at their disposal, Bible translators in Southern Africa have to decide to what extent the formal features of Hebrew aphorisms – such as parallelism, chiasmic arrangements, internal rhymes, alliterations and assonances, imagery, compressed syntax – can be transferred into their target language with stylistic naturalness. They will remember that wisdom sayings recorded in Israel, analysed and translated as part of the Masoretic Text, must be suitable in their new form for fresh utterances, quotations, public reading, re-interpretations, in contemporary preaching, teaching and worship. Any feature of oral art which is incorporated into the translated wisdom sentences from Ancient Israel, should facilitate the communication of these sentences and their acceptability in the target constituency. They are meant to become once more *wisdom sayings*, with a *textual base* but also suitable for a new lease of oral existence. In our age of “secondary orality”,²¹ *wisdom texts* and *wisdom sayings*, scriptural foundation and oral performance, cannot be separated. A wisdom heritage of practical ethic will thus travel once again from mouth to ear, via the writing hand, the printing press, the reading and viewing eye, the broadcasting media. Old Hebrew texts are gain called to bring words of wisdom from the Creator and Sustainer of the world to modern listeners, through the oral exposition of Scriptures (hopefully well translated).

Hebrew popular wisdom seen from Africa

A comparison between Hebrew and African wisdom traditions can open interesting avenues of investigation to the exegete, notably in transmission

19 E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: UBS 1969, 5 (further cited as TAPOT).

20 TAPOT, 133.

21 Ong, op. cit. 11.

criticism and history. Old Testament scholars have often pointed to the popular origins of the Book of Proverbs.²² Looking for its literary genesis, they have however concentrated their interest on the activities of scribes and royal counsellors. These court officials, highly trained in the elitist art of writing, have often been considered as the real – if not the only – authors and redactors of the Book of Proverbs.²³ The study of Egyptian and Babylonian models, where the scribal profession played such a large role, has certainly encouraged this concentration on wisdom texts and wisdom schools, whose artistic creations have been contrasted with the popular, supposedly simpler sayings of Ancient Israel. It was thought that traditional clan wisdom could not have produced elaborate wisdom sentences, not even the basic parallel structure of Hebrew poetry.

In a typical evolutionistic approach, there has been a tendency to date Hebrew aphorisms on the basis of their comparative complexity or simplicity. Shorter, one-limbed sayings have been deemed older, more “primitive”, than the distichs, stanzas or miniature essays contained in the Book of Proverbs. These views have come under sharp criticism, and rightly so.²⁴

It seems doubtful that popular wisdom simply disappeared from Jerusalem when Israelite sages began their didactic and literary endeavours. Bible translators in Africa look at the Book of Proverbs from the vantage point of a living oral tradition, now exposed to literacy. They thus tend to believe that traditional sapience, rooted in the clan or the patriarchal family, may have exercised a longer and deeper influence in Israel than text-bound biblical scholars would like to think. Judging from the viability and the tenaciousness of oral wisdom in contemporary Africa, it seems more likely that ordinary people in Israel continued to use popular proverbs and aphorisms, or even coined new ones, at the time when Israelite teachers and courtiers pursued their activities in diplomatic or royal circles. As Crenshaw rightly says, we should guard against

the assumption that only persons trained in professional schools had an ounce of literary expertise. One does not have to endorse the untenable theory of a noble savage, or its corollary the gifted *Volk*, to recognise that perceptive members of Israelite clans could have coined exquisite proverbs and persuasive instructions.²⁵

This is the kind of perspective which appeals to Bible translators, trained as they are to pay attention to a contemporary receptor language and its literary genres, as much as to the biblical source text.

In summary, the translation of biblical proverbs from the Hebrew source documents into a modern African language such as Tsonga raises questions of

22 G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*. London: SCM Press 1974, 11; R. B. Y. Scott, ‘Folk proverbs in the ancient Near East’, reprinted in J. L. Crenshaw (ed.), 1976, 417ff., Thomson, op cit. 66ff; Crenshaw (ed.) 1976, 14.

23 See for instance H. Duesberg and I. Fransen, *Les Scribes Inspirés*, Editions de Maredsous 1966, 331ff; McKane, op. cit., 2ff., H. Ringgren, *Sprüche*, in *ATD*, 1980, 3f.

24 See for instance the criticism of B. Gemser in The “Instructions of Onchsheshongy” and Biblical Literature, in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. J. L. Crenshaw 1976, 134–160.

25 Op. cit. (1981) 78.

similarities and differences between two comparable sapiential traditions, in form, function and content. Since functional equivalence and naturalness represent the goal of every quality translation, Bible translators should endeavour to pinpoint and utilize the stylistic resources of their target wisdom language, and rebuild them into a contemporary version of the Book of Proverbs. These resources are embedded in oral-based wisdom sayings, which have not shed their residue of orality when becoming recorded wisdom texts. African proverbs can thus furnish the stylistic tools for an acceptable rendering of Israel's ancient wisdom texts, called to become once more wisdom sayings in contemporary proclamation, instruction, and fresh application.

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ERASMUS' METHOD OF TRANSLATION IN HIS VERSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT¹

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A shock wave went through Europe in 1516, when a new Latin translation of the New Testament appeared in Basel. For a thousand years, the authoritative text of the Bible had been that of the Latin Vulgate. Now, the authority of the Vulgate was under attack from a competing Latin version. Its maker was the internationally famous theologian and man of letters, Erasmus of Rotterdam. His new Latin version of the New Testament was to be disseminated throughout Europe in over 250 printed editions. It became the most widely known Latin translation of the New Testament after the Vulgate.

What was Erasmus' purpose in making his new translation? Nothing less than the reform of the Christian world. Everywhere, Erasmus saw the corruption of morals; the decay of faith and theology; the immorality and selfish ambition of those whose duty it was to give leadership in the church and society. Erasmus wished to imbue people with a new ideal. After the revival of letters and learning, it was now time for faith and theology to be reinvigorated. People had to be convinced of the wisdom of Christ. By this, Erasmus understood a practical Christian faith, based on love of humanity and of peace, and stripped, as far as possible, of speculation about the supernatural. Such a mild and ethical piety should be the result of spiritual rebirth for every Christian.

To win Europe for this ideal of Christian gentleness, tolerance and responsibility, Erasmus wished, as far as possible, to encourage people to read the New Testament. But the problem was that there was no translation in existence which conformed to the sixteenth century's conception of good Latin. The Vulgate was composed in the ecclesiastical Latin of the fourth century. But

¹ This article was originally published in Dutch in the journal of the Netherlands Bible Society, vol. 4, no. 2, 1985, pp. 3-6).