

A CATHOLIC TRANSLATION IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH

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Introduction

Salvation History has an on-going history of its own, and part of its story lies in how God's word continues to keep up with the evolution of modern languages. *Los Libros Sagrados*, a translation now approaching completion, has constituted a recent chapter in this history. But to gain a proper perspective on this or any completely new translation of the Bible, we must see it in the context of the work which has preceded it.

Previous Spanish Translations

In Spain the Roman Catholic chronicler recognizes the beginning of a new period which began two hundred years ago. The two and one half centuries prior to it had been a time when translations into the vernacular had been prohibited by Rome. When Pope Benedict XIV altered this post-Reformation policy, it triggered a series of bit translations, and within a decade Felipe Scío de San Miguel had made a complete Spanish version of the Vulgate (1791-1793). Little more than a quarter of a century later Felix Torres Amat published another translation of the Vulgate (1823-1825) in which J. M. Petisco attempted to improve on Scío's efforts.¹ The last full translation from this period was that of Galban Rivera, based on the *Biblia de Vencé*, with notes by Camlet and published in Mexico between 1831 and 1833.

More than a century passed before another complete translation appeared in 1944, the work of Eloíno Nacar and Alberto Colunga. Published in the *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos (BAC)* series, it marked a turning point in the history of Roman Catholic Biblical translations as it was the first edition in Spanish based entirely and directly on the original languages. Initially the publication enjoyed only moderate success, but gradually its popularity increased until it was selling at 100,000 copies per year.

Three years later, in 1947, BAC brought out a second complete translation, the critical edition by J. M. Bover and F. Cantera. This too was based on the original, but its extreme literalness makes it more an instrument of study than a text for continuous reading.²

Between 1948 and 1951 Juan Straubinger produced another translation from the original. This was published in Buenos Aires. The past decade witnessed a further continuation of the same trend. F. Puzo *et alii* adapted

¹ This edition has been recently revised by P. Serafin of Aulsejo and republished by Herder in 1964.

² A revised edition of the same (by Felix Puzo, *et alii*) was published in 1962.

their translation (Barcelona, 1961-1962) to the notes from *La Sacra Biblia* by Vaccari. A committee of Spanish-American translators did the work on *La Biblia* for La Casa de la Biblia (Madrid, 1967). Edición Regina's *Sagrada Biblia* was translated by the Sons of the Heart of Mary (Barcelona, 1966).

One of the most popular recent translations was the *Jerusalem Bible* (Bilbao, 1967). Generally speaking this was a commendable enterprise, well printed and with very satisfactory notes. Still, the overall quality is uneven. In the Old Testament the translators relied perhaps a little too heavily on the French, and stylistically both the Old and the New Testaments vary from book to book with a range from poor to good.

Finally, complete versions currently being translated include that of the Asociación Bíblica Española para el Fomento de los Estudios Bíblicos (AFEBE), another translation from the original languages by Herder, and our own *Los Libros Sagrados*. To date, *Los Libros Sagrados* has published the following: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Psalms (the official liturgical edition), the Minor Prophets, Proverbs, Ben Sirach, the Pentateuch, the Song of Solomon, and the entire New Testament.

Reviewing this history we see that certain patterns recur. Usually some publishing house has commissioned a new translation. This was what happened with the linguistically and stylistically inferior Bible of Edición Regina, whose publishing specialty up to that time had actually been missals. The same was true of the hastily produced edition of La Casa de la Biblia. If such workmanship cannot always be excused, it is at least understandable in the light of frequent commercial demands for an entire Bible. Usually this means parcelling out individual books or parts of books to separate translators, with a resulting unevenness. In the Nácar-Colunga Bible an attempt was made which would obviate this difficulty: Nácar translated the entire Old Testament himself, and the result was a very even translation. Unfortunately, however, Nácar was already advanced in years when the Bible reached completion and, having been unable to keep pace with the developments in style which had revolutionized Spanish literature over the past eighty years, his work was from the viewpoint of the literary critic, already outdated at its appearance.

In general there seem to have been two basic approaches taken when a translation was inaugurated. First, there was the type of work usually done by the Biblical scholar who wishes to publish and elucidate his findings with new readings. This may well result in a good vernacular (e.g., Speiser in the Anchor Bible Series, or Gunkel in SAT), but it is characterized by its attention to technical details. The second type is the commentary translation. Here the most common trait is the translator's strong preoccupation with literalness and understanding, rather than with style.

In *Los Libros Sagrados* we have deviated from the standard pattern both in its initiation and its approach. First of all, it has been a joint project, conceived and executed by myself and the renowned poet, essayist and modern stylist, José María Valverde. Having started independently of any publisher's deadlines, we were able to indulge in the luxury of gradual and well planned beginnings with each book.

Again, the motivating goal was not primarily that of the researcher, but rather a desire to treat the books of Scripture precisely as literature. There

was no attempt to make significant new scientific discoveries; for these we availed ourselves of the work of other specialists which can be consulted in dictionaries, concordances, etc., e.g., Zimmerli's work on Ezekiel. The special interest here was rather the stylistic problem for reading and praying from the Bible. More "scientific" work may be tedious, but time and patience can accomplish it; to master style and spirit is something that demands both an intuitive and reflective control of the language.

Approaching the Hebrew text from this perspective involved breaking new ground. Studies of the Hebrew and Aramaic style in the Bible are a rarity. Books on the subject have simply not been written. Two steps were obviously necessary. (1) The original had to be read with an awareness of style. In turn this had to be augmented with an analysis of the book, using the methods of modern criticism. (2) The translator has to examine his own language for corresponding parallels in rhythm, antitheses, imagery, etc. Here too, copious reading, coupled with analysis and criticism, enable him to know his tools reflectively. The bridge between the two will only be complete when the translator has his feet planted firmly on both sides.

As the partner responsible for spanning this language gap, I was able to draw upon extensive reading done in the classics, both Spanish and other, as well as personal work in the stylistics of modern Spanish poetry and prose, which involved, among other things, teaching the techniques of style. On the Hebrew side, my doctoral thesis had pioneered analytical work precisely in the field of Hebrew poetics.³ This arrangement relieved us of the necessity of reworking a mechanically translated rough draft. As a first step we tried to reproduce the style of the Hebrew in its Spanish counterpart. The remaining work centred on revising the phrasing, correcting smaller details, etc.

All the books were treated in this fashion, but if any area received greater attention than another, it would be in the poetical books because of the integral, self-conscious style of this genre.

Wisdom Literature

Most of this literature consists of very short pieces or short poems. It belongs to that genre and species which can be described as a brief, concise statement of some value expressed according to set patterns of sounds and imagery.

Book of Proverbs

About half the proverbs are academic or prosaic statements. In Spanish the proverb has a long history as a literary type. One need only read Don Quixote to get a sample of the poetic spontaneity which has threaded its way through the whole tradition. When Sancho Panza is corrected for using proverbs, he apologizes—with another proverb. Even today some of the same sayings collected by Marqués de Santillana from usage current in the fifteenth century can still be heard in phonetically updated forms.

Before beginning the translation of the Book of Proverbs we had to examine the Santillana collection and other similar ones, establishing differences and stable forms as these appear in the Spanish genre. Particularly with our goal

³ Spanish edition 1963; expected abridged German edition in 1970.

in mind it was interesting to note the active and influential role taken by the Spanish Jews in the development of this literature.

One witness that bears evidence to their transcultural activity is the "Proverbios morales" by Rabbi Sem Tob of Carrión de los Condes. Among the best of its own fourteenth century, it is still a model of concise, striking language and it offers an insight into the subtle way the Hebrew stylistic treasury not only entered the Spanish language but also helped to shape it.

A similar but independent examination of Hebrew style balanced out the work from that aspect. Again it was a search for set patterns, types and margin of variations tolerated by the genre and an attempt to establish reflectively the mood and feeling of the original.⁴

It was only upon the completion of these two steps that we could draw up a set of correspondences based on the parallel genres in the two languages and begin translating. At times this was very routine, at other times, quite exciting. The real challenge lay in the fact that each proverb stands by itself. There can be no falling back on the momentum of a preceding context. To be a genuine reflection of the original, each translated formula must be usable as a Spanish proverb today.

Canticle of Canticles (Song of Solomon)

Although the proverb form extends to certain other sections of Wisdom literature, e.g., the opening chapters of Sirach, it does not exhaust the list. The Canticle of Canticles stands apart for sheer elegance of form. In spite of the fact that the Canticle is such a short book (only eight chapters) and it might be tempting to finish off the translation in one afternoon's work, in fact, it is far from being that simple. Written to be read aloud, as all classical poetry was, its sound patterns demand a special examination. The author of the Canticle did not feel compelled to maintain a strict metrical pattern, but made use of the same rich variety of rhythms as he did with his captivating imagery.

Love poetry is an international literary phenomenon to be found in every language. An extensive number of pieces have remained in Spanish literature from the Renaissance tradition (Garcilaso) and from the later Baroque period (Quevedo). But this manner of writing was much too stilted to be seriously considered as a vehicle for the Canticle. The two remaining traditions, the pre-Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the recent twentieth-century movement, turned out to be much more adaptable.

The former of these is represented by an abundance of love poetry. Its free rhythms spanned a whole spectrum of sound patterns to produce a subtle song-like quality. Its deceptive simplicity is pregnant with suggestions and subtle allusions, a combination which the Canticle itself achieved. As in the proverb literature, the Jewish writers of these centuries were not without influence in the area of the love poem. Here too they enjoyed a profound and very active tradition and again this paved the way within burgeoning Spanish literature for a common ground of form and, to a certain extent, content.

⁴ The results of this work were published in two articles: "Traducción de proverbios hebreos," *Cultura Bíblica* 24 (1967) 83-90; "Proverbios hebreos y refranes españolas," *Cultura Bíblica* 24 (1967) 275-281.

The more recent tradition, that of the last seventy years, has resurrected some of the same appealing characteristics of the pre-Renaissance period: freedom and variety of rhythm, novelty of images and simplicity of mood. It can be found in the works of Pedro Salinas, Rafael Alberti, Pablo Neruda and Nobel prize winner Juan Ramón Jiménez.

Again the actual translation work began only after a close investigation of the form, rhythm and sound patterns in the Hebrew. This was complemented with a comparative analysis of the stylistic approach of the Canticle and of contemporary Spanish poetry.⁵ This time, however, a third co-worker joined us, the Mexican poet José Luz Ojeda. Although he had not had a personal background in Biblical studies he had long been interested in Biblical poetry. He worked from the translation that I had drafted, which was faithful to the original images and expressions, and, although it was not set to a metric pattern, it was close to it. Using this text, Ojeda worked into it the rhythmical systems comparable to the various patterns of the original, always being careful, however, to retain a freedom of movement for each section. Afterwards we discussed these changes together for several weeks and then gave the second text to Valverde for him to examine it on choice of words, rhythms and composition as the final step.

Book of Job

Another book of Biblical poetry which had attracted Ojeda was the Book of Job as he had read it in Renier's French translation. From this he had already made a highly personal and poetic version in what was basically hendecameter but with variations. As it stood, it was excellent Spanish poetry but there were two drawbacks: (1) the underlying French was not up to date scientifically, and (2) rhythmically it was regular to the point of monotony. Maintaining this regularity had required constant inversion and period sentences. This is tolerable occasionally but not for forty consecutive chapters. The whole thing needed to be reworked into a less periphrastic version with tempos that varied more freely and naturally.

For this translation the first two steps used for the Canticle were reversed. Ojeda's translation, with its imaginative wording, images and concise language, formed the substratum. It was then my task to bring this up to current exegetical standards, to coordinate its content with the commentaries from Delitzsch to Fohrer while retaining the passion and import he had captured. Because Job is a longer, more rhetorical work, it amounted to a less meticulous task verse by verse.

As with the preceding books, the final draft was discussed with Valverde before deciding on the definitive version.

Pentateuch

After working in the Wisdom literature, switching over to the Pentateuch came as an abrupt change. Translating prose differed considerably from working in poetry and our *modus procedendi* reflected the transition.

⁵ These results can be found in "Traduciendo el Cantar de los Cantares," *Sal Terrae* 57 (1969) 696-709.

Leviticus

The Book of Leviticus is an exercise in legal phraseology. The first step towards translating it involved running seminars with a small group of students at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. In this workshop the material was first subdivided according to subject matter and then each participant prepared the technical vocabulary for his section. This established a number of set formulas for areas such as liturgy and law, as well as a printing style for titles and the indication of the various types of prescriptions according to content.

Using these word banks, each one made his own rough translation. The group then reassembled to criticize each other's work, each man being responsible for checking his particular section of vocabulary to maintain consistency in the final editing. If the style which resulted from this kind of translating was highly legal and specialized, it is because this was the style in the Hebrew.

Deuteronomy

The Book of Deuteronomy is rhetoric, the law in the mouth of the homilist. Even the technical sections retain this character, as for example chapters 12 through 25 which dwell to a great extent on the paraenesis and commentaries on laws and regulations. To inculcate loyalty to God's commandments, the preacher employs the various resources of his art, including a stock of fixed motivational formulas, hendiadys, and relative clauses used as predicates ("The land which I promised . . .").

Theologically, the Book of Deuteronomy is an important book, especially rich in social significance, but its style makes at least the first two readings rather trying. The tedious amplifications and repetitions only begin to become clear on the third or fourth time through. Nevertheless, for the sake of faithfulness to the Hebrew, we decided to imitate the structure of the original as we had done with Leviticus. We also worked in seminars again, establishing terminology (e.g., the sevenfold series of the names for the Law), standard formulas with their minor deviations, and rules for organizing long and transposed sentences, lengthier sections and periodic constructions.

Unlike the procedure with the Wisdom books, there was no attempt to locate or imitate a Spanish style of rhetorical eloquence, such as Donoso Cortés from the last century, or any other. Instead we relied on the clerical training of the translating team to provide us with a natural (and practical) acquaintance with Spanish preaching today.

Genesis and Exodus

The other narrative sections of the Pentateuch did not present any appreciably different problems. As a matter of fact, modern Spanish narrative (after Azorín) with its penchant for dialogue and short sentences is actually closer to the way the Biblical authors wrote than Spanish was at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It sufficed to capture, in simple and concrete language, its timeless sense of immediacy.

The only area where there was any difficulty was where the Biblical authors used the device of repeating the same words, sometimes with the same or

sometimes with an interrelated cluster of meanings. When there was a double meaning involved they could use it to build or release suspense. We duplicated this where possible in the Spanish, but of course word plays frequently refused to be translated.

Psalms

The translation of the Psalms, done in close collaboration with J. Mateos, brought with it a new criterion: the *Los Libros Sagrados* version was to be the official version for use in the Roman Catholic liturgy. This meant that in addition to the requirement that it be usable for private reading and prayer, it also had to be adaptable to common recitation and lend itself to being set to music.

Because of these specifications we avoided a strict rhythmical pattern, such as had been attempted by Prado or Angel González Nuñez's "silva form". As Bishop Méndez Arceo of Cuernavaca once blithely remarked: "Reading or praying half an hour in decasyllables could bring on diabetes."

The alternative was the solution of modern free verse, such as the cosmic and elemental poetry of Neruda, changing freedom of rhythm to stressed and unstressed syllables. The original meter of the Hebrew sentences of about the same length could be rendered in the Spanish in approximately the same way. This made a fluid and readable text for the person praying or reading it privately, but allowed for the stresses and pauses needed to give the lead and unity for group recitations.

When we consulted with professional musicians on meeting the third criterion, we were advised that if the text is readable it is singable, even though perhaps not in the setting of a Bach chorale. In practice this meant disregarding explicit consideration of the Gregorian tonalities or the adaptations like the Gelineau arrangements. (One successful setting, successful in the sense that it enjoyed quick popularity, was that of Manzano.)

Contrary to the prevalent theory, we found that the original imagery of the Psalms was not so far removed from that used in Spanish today. Most of the figures turn on fundamental, transcendently human themes: war and peace, hunger and thirst, family, crops, rain. These might be inaccessible for some scholars but the ordinary reader finds them perfectly natural, and our policy was to use them as they stood in all their immediacy and simplicity. Only one or two images were so inseparably bound up with an unfamiliar cultural matrix that they had to be substituted (e.g., horn of David in Ps. 132: 17), or certain uses of grease and oil. Otherwise we always gave preference to the material over the spiritualizing translation.

All this is far from an exhaustive chronicle of *Los Libros Sagrados*, but it gives an overview of some of the more important considerations underlying the project.