

and “cleave to” in the context of Israel’s covenant with the LORD as well as in the context of marriage indicates that the Old Testament viewed marriage as a kind of covenant between a man and his wife: the bond between them is strong and meant to be permanent.

**They become one flesh.** This does not mean, of course, a literal becoming of two human beings into “one flesh” as such, nor does it even merely refer to the sexual union that follows marriage. It points to the emotional and spiritual union that the couple experience as they enter into the new relationship.

### Conclusion

If Gen 2.24 could have been understood and translated as I have suggested here, that would have been closer to the meaning of the text; and the doubts and uneasiness of the people I referred to at the beginning of this article could also have been avoided.

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## BIBLICAL KINSHIP TERMS AND THEIR TRANSLATION INTO THE KARO LANGUAGE

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The life of the Karo people who originally lived in a fertile agricultural area in North Sumatra was simple. The simplicity of their life is reflected in the phrase *Ku juma ku rumah*, which means: “Go to the farm and then come back home.” Like the life-style of the people, the structure of the Karo language is simple and straight forward. Complicated ideas have to be stated in several short sentences, step by step until the full expression of the thought is reached.

Personal pronouns in Karo do not differ according to gender. The third person form *ia* is used for male and female, and its suffix form *na* is used for things also, animate or inanimate. However, there are ways of identifying gender in the language. One way is by inserting the word *beru* between the personal and family names of a female person. For example, if a girl’s name is Nora and her family name is Ginting she will be called Nora *beru* Ginting. If the person is a male, then the personal name and the family name are next to each other. This means that unmarked names are the names of male persons, and marked names are female names.

Another way of identifying a person is by using a kinship term. This is the most common way. In Karo culture, as a general rule, younger people are not allowed to mention the names of those who are older. The older ones may mention the names of those who are younger, as long as the kinship relationship allows. For example, a man is not allowed to mention the name of his mother’s brother even though the mother’s brother is

younger than he is. He will refer to him as *mama*, without mentioning his name.

Due to this custom the names of married people usually disappear once they have children. The name of the first-born child will be used to identify them. That is why most people do not know the name of their grandmother or grandfather, because their names are never mentioned.

In the light of these features, it is clear that there will be some difficulties in translating the kinship terms in the Bible into the Karo language. The problems arise from the fact that there is the need to identify the relationship between individuals who address each other in the Bible. There is also often the need to know which person is older among them, so that the correct term can be used.

### **Kinship terms in the Karo language**

In the Karo culture the kinship relationship is very important. It binds people together to make their lives "stand" and find the sense of completeness. The kinship relationship is expressed in kinship terms, which define the relationship between individuals. Each individual addresses others or is addressed in kinship terms. The following are some of the kinship relationship terms with a brief explanation of each of them.

*Nini* is a genderless term that can be used both to grandfather and grandmother. To address or refer to one of them in particular an additional word is used. So grandfather is *nini bulang* or just *bulang*, and grandmother is *nini tudung*. (*Bulang* and *tudung* mean a man's head-dress and a woman's head-dress respectively.) The term *nini* applies not only to those who are old and have their own grandchildren, but even to the unmarried ones, whose status in the kinship relationship calls for the use of the term. Furthermore, this term can also mean "ancestor". Therefore we can say, "All the people who live in the village are one *nini*."

*Bapa* is the regular term for "father". It is used not only for a person's own father, but also for the father's brothers, married or unmarried, other males of the same *merga* (family name) who are of the same level with the father, and the husband of the mother's sister. The father's older brother is *bapa tua* and the father's younger brother is *bapa nguda*.

*Nande* is a term derived from the verb which means "to lean on". So *nande* "mother" is someone the family leans on. As in the case of the term for "father", the term *nande* is used not only for a person's own real mother. The term is also used for the wives of the father's brother and for the wives of those who have the same *merga* with the person's own real father. An additional word is sometimes used to indicate which of the mothers is meant. The wife of the father's older brother is *nande tua*, and the wife of the father's younger brother is *nande nguda*.

*Mama* is the term used for the brother of a person's mother ("uncle"). It is also the term for the father of a person's wife ("father-in-law"), since in the Karo culture there are strict rules that require marriage to be between

people in this particular kinship relationship. At the present time, however, there is no longer a strict imposition of that custom. Nevertheless if a man wants to marry someone other than the daughter of his mother's brother, his whole family has to ask permission from the family of his mother's brother.

*Mami* is the wife of *mama*. It is taboo for a mother-in-law to speak to her son-in-law and to her son-in-law's father. Therefore if she wants to say something to her son-in-law, she has to say it through her daughter, or through another person. The same applies to the son-in-law: if he wants to say something to his mother-in-law, he has to say it through his wife, or through other people.

*Bibi* is the husband's mother ("mother-in-law") and also the mother's sister and the father's sister.

*Anak* means "son" or "daughter". This term is used not only for a person's own sons and daughters but also for the sons and daughters of the brothers (nephews and nieces). Usually only the sons receive inheritance from their parents, especially in the matter of land, but in all other matters sons and daughters are treated equally. As mentioned above, after married people have their first child they are no longer called by their own names, but by the name of their first-born.

*Senina* and *turang*. The term *senina* is used between brothers (a man to another man), and between sisters (a woman to another woman). Between brother and sister, that is, a man to a woman or a woman to a man, the term *turang* is used. These terms are used not only for a person's own real brothers and sisters but also for others of the same *merga* and the same level in the kinship system. For a real brother the term *sembuyak* is used, when there is no need to indicate whether the person is an older or a younger brother.

*Kempu*. Nowadays this term is used either for "grandchild" or "great-grandchild". In the old days the term *ente* was used for great-grandchild and the term *entah* for great-great-grandchild, meaning "I am not sure who he/she is", due to the gap of generations separating two people in this relationship.

These are some of the kinship terms in the Karo language. There are still other terms, but they are not commonly used by people in addressing each other. They refer more to the function of a person in the kinship system, but the relationship is more remote.

### **The translation of Hebrew kinship terms into Karo**

The feminine form of *dod* is *dodah*, "aunt." This term is found in Lev 18.14. The text there reads, "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt." In the Karo kinship system the uncle's wife (the wife of the father's brother) is called "mother" *nande*; but it would be wrong to translate that

verse as “she is your *nande* (mother).” It would also be wrong to translate it as “she is your *bibi* (aunt),” because *bibi* in Karo means the mother’s or father’s sisters. We note that the emphasis of the prohibition is the kinship relationship: “she is **your** aunt.” Therefore one of the following suggestions can be considered as possible translations of the verse. First, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is **the wife of your father’s brother.**” Here the kinship term is translated as a mere repetition of the previous statement. The second possibility is, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is **mother-like to you.**” Noticeably there is a difference of focus between the first and the second translations. The point of reference of the prohibition in the first translation is the “uncle” (“she is the wife of your father’s brother”). The point of reference in the second translation is the mother (“she is mother-like to you.”) But actually the second translation does not discount the uncle, because she is called “mother” on account of the uncle. Therefore in the context of the Karo culture the second translation is preferable.

The same term *dodah* is found in Ex 6.20. The text reads, “Amram took to wife Jochebed his *dodah*.” From Ex 6.16, 18 and Num 26.59 we know that Jochebed is the sister of Kohath, who was Amram’s father. The translation looks simple because the Karo term for that kinship relationship is *bibi*. The translation would be, “Amram took to wife Jochebed his *bibi* (aunt).” The problem with this is that the Karo culture does not allow a man to marry his father’s sister, but it is possible to marry his mother’s sister who is also *bibi*. So if the translation is just *bibi*, the reader will think that *bibi* is the mother’s sister instead of the father’s sister because of the influence of the culture. Therefore the term *bibi* should be avoided in this context; instead *dodah* should be translated not with one word, but with a phrase: “Amram took to wife Jochebed, *turang bapana* (his father’s sister).”

The term *ach* means “brother, born of the same mother (and father); relative; nephew, kinship in wider sense; member of the same tribe; of the same people” (Brown, Driver & Briggs *Lexicon*, page 26). From this list we can see that *ach* covers a wide range of meanings; and because of this it has to be translated into different words in Karo like *sembuyak* (brother of the same father and mother), *senina* (brother of the same family name), *turang* (sister or brother), and even *anak* (son in the sense of nephew). The meaning of each occurrence of the term has to be determined according to the context, and the appropriate Karo word used to translate in each case. The following are some examples.

In Gen 42.4 we read, “But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph’s brother, with his brothers. . .” According to Gen 30.22-24 (the birth of Joseph); 35.16-28 (the birth of Benjamin, and the list of Jacob’s sons), Benjamin is Joseph’s younger brother. Therefore “Joseph’s brother” in this context should be translated into Karo as *Benyamin agi Jusup* (“Benjamin the younger brother of Joseph”). Actually Benjamin and

Joseph are brothers with the rest of the sons of Jacob. But the relationship between Benjamin and Joseph was closer than with the others, because they were from the same mother (Rachel). The special relationship is clearly emphasized in Gen 43.29 which says, "his brother Benjamin, his mother's son". They not only had the same father as the rest of the brothers, but they also had the same mother. However if this phrase is translated literally, the sense that a Karo reader will get is that Benjamin was his mother's favorite son. This certainly is not the meaning of the phrase. In order to avoid this misinterpretation and not to miss the emphasis, the phrase may be translated, *agina Benyamin, eme sembuyakna kal* ("his younger brother, from the same womb (mother)").

Part of Gen 14.14 reads, "When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men. . ." And verse 16 reads, "Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his goods, and the women and the people." In both verse 14 and verse 16 the word *ach* is translated as "his kinsman". The BDB lexicon gives the meaning of this occurrence as "nephew". Apparently there is no term for "nephew" in the Hebrew language and so it uses *ach* ("brother") even in referring to the son of the brother. (See also Gen 12.5.) Karo also does not have a term for "nephew"; instead the term *anak* "child" is used even in referring to brothers' sons and daughters. It would be misleading if Gen 14.14, 16 is translated into Karo using *senina* ("brother"), because it would mean that Abraham and Lot are on the same level in the kinship system as Karo understands it. The correct translation then is *anak* ("son"); but perhaps better yet would be *anak sembuyakna* ("the son of his brother"). It may be argued that the sense of brotherhood or equality between Abraham and Lot is missing in such a translation, because Lot is no longer referred to as *ach*. But the correct meaning does come through in this case, because in the Karo culture father and sons, brother and brother's sons, especially the married ones, are treated equally, that is, they have the same rights and responsibilities.

In Gen 29.12, 13 the same word *ach* is found. Its meaning is also "nephew", but in this context it refers to the sister's son. "And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father. When Laban heard the tidings of Jacob his sister's son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house." Due to the elaborate kinship system and the kinship terms of the Karo tribe, the same Hebrew word has to be translated into a different term in this case. That term is *bere-bere* ("sister's son"). The translation then is, "he was her father's *bere-bere*." The case described here can be understood clearly in the context of Karo culture. According to the Karo tradition, the man (Laban) is supposed to give in marriage one of his daughters to his sister's son (in this case Jacob). In the old days it was a common practice among the Karo people that the *bere-bere* ("nephew", "sister's son") worked for the *mama* ("uncle") before the uncle's daughter was given to him in marriage, just as Jacob did for Laban. The difference is that Gen 29.15 refers to the marriage as "wages", but in Karo the work

was regarded as a sign of devotion to the *kalimbubu* ("the visible god").

### **The avoidance of names**

Now we will examine another special case of kinship relationship and see how the relationship operates differently in the culture of the people of the Bible and in the Karo culture. I have already mentioned that Karo custom does not allow a younger person to mention the names of those who are older and respected. In the Bible the only name which may not be mentioned is the sacred name of *Yahweh* "the LORD". But in the Karo culture the name of a person is considered to be so "sacred" that each person is not allowed to mention the names of certain other people. Even husband and wife do not call each other by their names. To mention the name of an older person is considered to be disrespectful to that person and even an insult to him. Therefore the question arises, How do we translate conversations in the Bible when people are addressed or referred to by name? Should the text be adjusted for the Karo custom and language? To illustrate this case, let us quote from Gen 24.23-24, "[The man] said, 'Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to lodge in?' She [Rebekah] said to him, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.' "

Rebekah's way of introducing herself in this passage is inconceivable in the context of the Karo culture. She not only mentioned the name of her father, but the names of her grandmother and grandfather. So the question may be asked, Is it necessary to make an adjustment so as to make Rebekah speak like a Karo girl, by making her not mention her father's name, but identifying her father in the way a Karo girl would do it? The answer depends very much on how a Karo girl would do it, and what is involved in the way she would say it.

If a Karo girl is asked to identify who her father is in a similar situation, she would probably mention the names of her brothers or sisters or other relatives, or her father's job, and so on, which would eventually point to the identity of her father, while she avoided saying the name of the father. Or, she could do it in another way by saying something like this: "May the leaves of the trees in the forest be not withered, and the sparkling water from the fountain not turn cloudy as I mention the name of my father." After that she can mention the name of her father. By saying that it is as if she has apologized deeply and asked for forgiveness as she mentions the name of her father. At the same time by saying that "formula" it is as if she is calling on all her strength and courage in order to be able to mention the name of someone she respects.

Can such a tradition as this be introduced into the Bible? I don't think so. If this is brought into the translation it really means that the translator is imposing an element of culture which is foreign to the Bible. This is no longer just conveying the biblical message, but it is changing it into Karo literature with Karo customs.

The possible impression that Rebekah is disrespectful to her father and her grandparents in this passage can (probably) be avoided by

inserting a footnote to the verse. The footnote would indicate that in the Hebrew culture mentioning the names of parents and grandparents was not considered as disrespectful to them. In addition Rebekah's words could also be rearranged to make them easier for the reader to understand, namely, by using Karo kinship terms. The sentence would then run like this, "*Gelar bapangku e me Bethuel, ninibulangku Nahor, janah nitudungku e me Milka.*" ("My father is Bethuel, my grandfather was Nahor, and my grandmother was Milca.")

Unlike the Hebrew language, nouns in Karo have no gender. The literal translation of the biblical names therefore does not indicate whether they are female or male names. Names are generally understood as male names when they occur in expressions like "the son of. . ." or "the daughter of. . .", because in the Karo culture, if ever the names of the parents are mentioned, it is usually the name of the father that is used in identifying the children. For example, 1 Sam 26.6 says, "Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai the **son of Zeruiah**, 'Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?' " In Hebrew, Zeruiah will be recognized as a female name because of its ending, but in Karo the name will be considered as a male name for the reason given above. It is necessary then to identify Zeruiah as a female name by saying that Zeruiah was the mother of Joab and Abishai. The translation of the first part of that verse into Karo is as follows, "Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai (the mother of these two is Zeruiah). . ." In this way Zeruiah is indicated as a woman by saying that she was "the mother of". And so the misinterpretation that Zeruiah was a man is avoided. However it is not always possible to apply that method. This is especially true in a direct discourse such as in 2 Sam 16.10; 19.22, "What have I to do with you, you **sons of Zeruiah?**"

### **The translation of Greek kinship terms into Karo**

*Pater* is the term for a person's biological or adoptive male parent, "father". This term is found, for instance, in Heb 12.9. The term in this verse is clearly understood as a biological father. Therefore it should be translated in Karo as *bapa-nta i doni* ("earthly fathers", RSV). In Lk 2.48 the translation would be *aku ras bapa-ndu* ("your father and I", RSV). In Heb 7.3 the words "without father or mother" (RSV) will create misunderstanding if translated literally. In Karo there is no word "without"; therefore the phrase can only be translated literally as "no father nor mother", which would be understood in Karo as "an orphan". This is certainly not the meaning of the text. According to F.F. Bruce in *The Epistle to the Hebrews* the point that the writer wants to make is that there is no record in the Scriptures about the parentage of Melchizedek. Therefore the phrase should be translated as *ibas Pustaka la lit isuratken kerna nande-bapana tah pe terombona* ("in the scriptures there is no record of his parents or his genealogy").

*Meter* means a person's biological or adoptive female parent "mother".

Since the Karo word *nande* for mother is not used exclusively for a person's own biological mother, the Greek term can be consistently translated as *nande* (Mt 1.18; Mk 6.24; Lk 8.21; Jn 2.1; 2 Tim 1.5). Also, if in Jn 2.4 the term *gyne* ("woman") is understood as a polite way for Jesus to address his mother, the term *nande* should also be used there. If it is translated literally as *diberu* or *beru* it means that Jesus addresses his mother in an impolite manner or calls her a little girl. The term *beru* on the other hand should be used to translate the term *korasion* in Mk 5.41, when Jesus addresses the little girl to raise her.

*Mamme* is the mother of a person's own mother or father (with a possible feeling of affection), "grandmother". In Karo there is no distinction between the grandmother on the father's side and the grandmother on the mother's side. There are however, different terms for grandmothers on the basis of the *merga*, which is irrelevant to Jewish and Greek cultures. Therefore the term "grandmother" in 2 Tim 1.5 should be translated as *nini tudung*. There still remains a problem in that verse because the name "Lois" is mentioned, as well as "Eunice", which is contrary to custom in Karo culture. But for the sake of faithfulness to content, the name cannot be dropped out.

*Adelphos* is the term for a male having the same father and mother as the reference person, "brother". The general term for this in Karo is *sembuyak*, but the language prefers a particular kinship term in relation to the reference person. The RSV translates the first part of Mt 4.18 as follows: "As he walked by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother. . ." The first problem here is how to translate "two brothers". In Karo, if translated literally it will mean that the speaker and the "two brothers" are all brothers. Therefore the relationship between the "two" has to be stated, that they are related to one another as brothers, which in Karo is *dua kalak si sembuyak* (literally "two persons who are from the same womb"). The second problem is the relationship between Simon and Andrew: which of them is older? On the basis of Semitic usage, the older is usually mentioned first (see Gen 4.8; 35.23). So Andrew is Simon's younger brother; and therefore the translation will be *Petrus ras agina Andreas* ("Peter and his younger brother, Andrew").

*Adelphé* means a female having the same father and mother as the reference person, "sister". It is obvious that Jesus' sisters are younger than himself, therefore it is possible to use the term *agi* in translation. Whereas the term *agi* is used both for "younger brother" and "younger sister", the term *turang* is used for sister(s) both younger and older. Out of these two possibilities the term *turang* is preferable in Mk 6.3 ("are not his sisters here with us?"), because the emphasis in this verse is not on age, but on gender.

*Anepsios* is a term which refers to the child of a person's uncle and aunt, either on the father's side or the mother's side, "cousin". The Karo



kinship terminology requires one of two terms for “cousin”, either *senina* for cousins on the father’s side or *impal* for cross cousins, that is, cousins on the mother’s side as well as children of the sister of the father. There is no way of knowing from the context of Col 4.10 what the exact relationship was between Mark and Barnabas, but for languages with no general term for cousins, but only different terms for parallel cousins or cross cousins, it is necessary to select one or another of these terms in speaking of Mark. Since a choice must be made, the term *impal* will be appropriate. The reason is that this term itself is ambiguous in Karo, although not to the same extent as the Greek word. The term *impal* in Karo means cross cousins, the children either of the mother’s brother or of the father’s sister.

*Nymphe*. As a relationship term this means the wife of person’s son, that is, “daughter-in-law”. The Karo term for daughter-in-law is *permen*, but this has another meaning too, that is, the children of the brother of a person’s wife. Judging from the Karo cultural context, there will be no problem in translating Lk 12.53 simply as “mothers-in-law will be against their daughters-in-law, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law.” This will be the case, even though the terms for “mother-in-law” and “daughter-in-law” each have more than one meaning, because the message of the verse is about a common experience in the life situation of the people. So the reader will readily understand it as the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

As far as figurative language is concerned, there are no idioms in Karo like “children of light” and “children of the day”; but there are similar idioms like *anak kunci* which literally means “child of a key”, that is, a key to a padlock, and *anak jabu*, “child of the home”, that is, a member of the family. Because of this, many of the Greek idioms can be translated literally.

### Conclusion

The terms and usages that I have referred to in this article are particularly those which show that word-for-word (term-for-term) translation of the Bible will not give a meaningful result in a language such as the Karo language. In many contexts only a careful study of the kinship relationships involved will lead to an accurate and meaningful translation.

I have also discussed cases where cultural differences related to kinship and attitudes to the use of personal names have a bearing on translation of the biblical text. In some of these cases the use of footnotes explaining the differences seems to be the only way of being faithful to the text and helping the reader to understand what it means.