

THE LECTIONARY APPROACH IN SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION

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When a Scripture translation project is done in the context of established churches, one key to seeing the translated Scriptures in use is to find out how the existing churches use Scripture. Over two-thirds of the world's Christians are accustomed to following a lectionary pattern of Scripture use in church services. It follows that if translation programs in those contexts want to meet the felt need for Scripture use, they should follow that pattern as well.

This is nothing more than "scratching where it itches", a principle which has been well articulated and successfully employed in the area of applied anthropology and Christian missions. Perhaps this is an idea that requires closer attention in planning Scripture translation programs.

In this article I will discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of using a lectionary approach rather than a book-by-book approach in planning the order in which Scripture portions will be translated. This leads to a consideration of the trade-off between initial quality and the acceptance and use that the different approaches pose. First, however, I want to summarize some of the reasoning behind the use of a lectionary in Christian worship and the roots of the practice in the early church. Then I will describe the origins, structure, and content of the lectionary which is used today by fully two-thirds of Christendom, including the Roman Catholic church and many Protestant denominations.

The lectionary tradition

The word "lectionary" comes from the Latin *lectio*, "a selection, a reading", and refers to a book (or a listing) of Scripture selections appointed to be read at public worship on specified days of the year. Each such selection is called a lection, or a pericope. Closely allied with the notion of lectionary is that of the calendar of the Church Year (also known as the Christian Year or the Liturgical Year or the Calendar). In modern usage the Church Year has four principal seasons: Advent (preparation for Christmas), Christmastide (Christmas to Epiphany), Lent (preparation for Easter), and Eastertide (Easter to Pentecost). In a lectionary, the Scripture passages for certain days and seasons of the Church Year are chosen because of their thematic connection with them.

The main thinking behind the use of lectionaries in Christian worship is that it ensures a systematic and orderly exposition of the Scriptures in all local congregations. One advantage of the readings being based on the themes of the Church Year is that "worshippers are regularly reminded of the great events of the Christian faith and a balance kept between them" (Peter S. Dawes). Eugene Brand of the Lutheran Church in America gives a more forceful defense: "The purpose of the Lectionary is to unfold the full sweep of God's revelation, not avoiding the hard words. If properly designed, a lectionary keeps the church from the ever present danger of domesticating the Scriptures. . . . The lectionary and the calendar together constitute the time-tested antidote for subjectivism in the liturgical reading of the Bible and the subsequent preaching of the Word."

A modern lectionary for two-thirds of Christendom

The Second Vatican Council, which met from 1963 to 1965, ushered in a great number of reforms in the Roman Catholic church. Those of greatest significance for the work of Scripture translation were a return to the use of vernaculars in worship and a renewed emphasis on the Bible. Concerning the latter, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) promulgated by the Council has the following to say:

The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's Word. In this way a more representative portion of the Holy Scriptures will be read to the people over a set cycle of years. (Section 51)

In sacred celebrations there is to be more reading from holy Scripture, and it is to be more varied and suitable. (Section 35)

The ministry of preaching is to be fulfilled with exactitude and fidelity. The sermon, moreover, should draw on content mainly from Scriptural and liturgical sources. (Section 35)

And the Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*) states:

Easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. (Section 22)

All the preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks to them. (Section 21)

These pronouncements of Vatican 2 opened the way for a major reform of the lectionary. A commission was appointed in 1964 and five years later the new lectionary was published under the title *Ordo Lectionum Missae*. It is usually referred to simply as the OLM in the literature. The two most striking features of the new lectionary are that it returned to the ancient practice of including an Old Testament reading in addition to the Epistle and Gospel, and it went to a three-year cycle so as to greatly expand the amount of Scripture to which worshippers are exposed. For the latter reason, this new lectionary is also often referred to as the Three Year Cycle. (A fuller description of the content and coverage of the OLM is the subject of the next section.) It should be said that hand-in-hand with the revision of the lectionary, went a revision of the Church Year. Major revisions including dropping the extraneous minor or mythological saints' days, simplifying a more complex medieval calendar to the current four principal seasons, and changes in the system for naming and numbering the Sundays from Pentecost to the end of the year. Some of the resistance to the new lectionary has been due more to the simultaneous changes in the calendar of the Church year.

The publication of the OLM was greeted with enthusiasm by many Protestant churches which were considering the revision of their own lectionaries. The Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the United Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod have all published lectionaries based on OLM. In addition to the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. and the Anglican Church of Canada, many other provinces of the Anglican Communion have authorized the use of OLM as an alternative to their previous lectionaries.

These include Scotland, England, Canada, Australia, Central Africa, and Melanesia (and no doubt others more recently).

It is not possible to arrive at an exact figure for what percentage of world-wide Christian churches now use the OLM lectionary. However, we can arrive at an approximate figure. The *World Christian Encyclopedia* gives the following figures for total world Christian population:

Roman Catholic	809 million	63%
Eastern Orthodox	124 million	10%
Protestant	345 million	27%
TOTAL	1278 million	100%

From this we know that the pattern of Scripture use followed by 63% of world Christians (all the Roman Catholics) is found in the OLM lectionary. Based on church membership figures in the *1981 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, the total population of the Protestant denominations in the United States and Canada listed above which are committed to the OLM lectionary is 26 million, or another 2% of world Christian population. Thus with 65% of world Christian population known to be using the OLM lectionary, plus those Protestant groups in Europe, Canada, Australia and the Third World who are already using it or are soon to embrace it, we can safely estimate that fully two-thirds of Christendom follows the OLM lectionary to establish its pattern of Scripture use.

The plan and coverage of the OLM lectionary

The complete lectionary consists of readings for Sundays based on a three-year cycle, readings for major holy days (also known as feast days or festivals, for instance Christmas or Good Friday), daily readings based on a two-year cycle, readings for lesser holy days (for instance, saints' days), and readings for special ritual masses (such as marriage, baptism, and so on). The comments in this section cover only the lectionary for Sundays and major holy days.

The years of the three-year cycle are called Year A, Year B, and Year C. They are fixed to actual dates as follows: Year C is when the date is divisible by 3. Thus 1983, 1986, 1989, and so on are Years C. Thus 1981, 1984, 1987, and so on are Years A; and 1982, 1985, and 1988, and so on are Years B. Note, however, that the Church Year begins with the first Sunday of Advent, which falls on the last Sunday in November or the first in December. The new lectionary year thus begins a month before the date calculated above. For instance, the last Year C began with the first Sunday of Advent on 28 November 1982.

The lectionary prescribes three readings for each Sunday and major holy day. They are:

- (1) a first reading from the Old Testament, (replaced by Acts during Eastertide),
- (2) a second reading from the Epistles or Revelation,
- (3) a third reading from the Gospels.

Typical lengths for these readings are 5 verses each for the first and second readings, and 10 verses for the third reading. However, the actual range runs from 2 verses for the first or second reading, up to entire chapters for the Gospel readings. The readings were selected on the following basis. For the main seasons of the Church Year (Advent, Christmastide, Lent, Eastertide) and the major holy days, the readings were chosen to harmonize with the theme of the season or the day. For the remaining Sundays, which are called collectively the Sundays of the Year and are thirty-four in number, the Gospel readings are semi-continuous selections: Year A uses Matthew, Year B uses Mark, and Year C uses Luke. "Semi-continuous" means that from Sunday to Sunday the readings come in the sequence of the book, but there may be portions that are skipped over between Sundays. The result is that over the course of the year, the full sweep of the Gospel is read from beginning to end.

The Old Testament readings for the Sundays of the Year are chosen to harmonize with and shed light on the Gospel readings. This serves to emphasize the unity of the Old and New Testaments. The Epistle readings are also semi-continuous and do not necessarily bear a thematic relationship to the other two readings.

Over the full three-year cycle, 3280 out of the 7954 verses of the New Testament are read. This represents 41% of the New Testament. 945 Old Testament verses are read; this is about 4% of the Old Testament (equivalent in size to 12% of the New Testament). Table 1 gives a book-by-book breakdown of New Testament coverage by the lectionary for Sundays and major holy days.

Table 1—New Testament coverage of the OLM Lectionary for Sundays and major holy days

	Verses read	Total verses	Per cent coverage	Appears in which year
Matthew	587	1071	55%	A
Mark	412	678	61%	B
Luke	673	1151	58%	C
John	531	878	60%	A, B, C
Acts	167	1007	17%	A, B, C
Romans	119	433	27%	A
1 Corinthians	175	436	40%	A, B, C
11 Corinthians	49	256	19%	B
Galatians	41	149	28%	C
Ephesians	80	155	52%	B
Philippians	49	104	47%	A, C
Colossians	36	95	38%	C
1 Thessalonians	39	89	44%	A
11 Thessalonians	17	47	36%	C
1 Timothy	20	113	18%	C
11 Timothy	25	83	30%	C
Titus	8	46	17%	A, B, C
Philemon	8	25	32%	C
Hebrews	83	303	27%	B, C

contd over

	Verses read	Total verses	Per cent coverage	Appears in which year
James	34	108	31%	B
1 Peter	36	105	34%	A
11 Peter	7	61	11%	B
1 John	31	105	30%	B
11 John	0	13	0%	
111 John	0	15	0%	
Jude	0	23	0%	
Revelation	53	405	13%	C
TOTALS	3280	7954	41%	

Disadvantages of a lectionary approach to translation

No translator can translate the Bible in one sitting. Therefore, in any translation program it is necessary to devise a plan whereby the Scriptures will be translated bit by bit over a period of years. One common plan is the book-by-book approach, in which a whole book is translated before moving on to another book. Another possible plan is the lectionary approach in which the portions to translate are selected in such a way as to ensure that the appointed readings for each Sunday and holy day are prepared far enough in advance that they can be used in church services throughout the language area.

In the context of lectionary-using churches, both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. In this section I will discuss the disadvantages of the lectionary approach as against the book-by-book approach. In the next section I will consider the advantages. The following are some disadvantages:

- (1) Passages are translated in isolation, taken out of their full context.
- (2) It may prove difficult after the whole lectionary has been translated, to go back and fill in the gaps to complete whole books. This is related to the problem of translating out of context. When the individual readings are pulled together in reference order to reconstruct a whole book, the pieces may not fit together. Transitions are likely to be rough; vocabulary is likely to be inconsistent; the higher level relationships between the paragraphs that have been fitted together may be off. Thus filling in the missing passages really becomes a matter of reworking the whole book, revising the translated portions and translating the missing portions all with reference to the context of the whole.
- (3) When a beginning translator jumps into a lectionary program it is not possible to first practice on easier portions of Scripture. Epistles and Old Testament poetry must be translated right from the beginning alongside the easier gospel narratives.
- (4) A lectionary program, with its Sunday by Sunday due dates, has the potential of forcing the translator to rush through work in order to meet deadlines.

Advantages of a lectionary approach to translation

The following are advantages of a lectionary approach as opposed to a book-by-book approach. It should be noted that while the advantages of the book-by-book method relate to the quality of translation, the advantages of the lectionary approach relate to greater use and acceptance of the translated Scriptures. Keep in mind that these comments are relevant only for programs in which the local churches follow a lectionary in establishing patterns of Scripture use.

- (1) The use of the translated Scriptures is virtually guaranteed. Once the church authorities have approved and commended the translations, the local churches are obliged to follow. When a project is set up such that the church authorities oversee the distribution of the translated passages to the local churches, their use in the local churches is that much more certain.
- (2) The lectionary scratches where the local churches are itching with respect to their desire for Scriptures. The passages on the Sunday calendar are precisely those passages the church wants. By contrast, when a book-by-book approach is pursued among lectionary-using churches, the normal pattern of Scripture use in local church worship has no place for a newly translated book; it is likely not to be used, unless special programs outside of normal church services are set up (such as Bible studies).
- (3) The church members first hear the translation instead of seeing it. Where readers have basic literacy skills but are not fluent readers, their understanding of the translated Scriptures is likely to be higher when they hear them than when they read them. Introducing the translation orally avoids the situation where people who are poor readers may criticize the translation when in fact they are covering up their inability to read with understanding. Where there are competing orthographic traditions or other problems of orthography, the church members can hear and accept the translations without being distracted by the problems of orthography. Dialect differences may be more easily overlooked when heard and understood in context than when confronted on the written page. All of these factors enhance the likelihood of the translations being accepted.
- (4) The acceptance of the lectionary translations virtually ensures the acceptance of the published translation of the full Scriptures at a later date.
- (5) The calendar of the lectionary forces productivity; the due dates for the translations cannot be changed. In two national translator projects I am supervising, one following a lectionary approach and the other a book-by-book approach, the former translator has not yet missed a deadline in two years, while the latter frequently fails to meet the completion goals we set. A key factor here is a sense of responsibility to the community. If a translator misses a lectionary deadline the whole community suffers the loss in their worship service; if a book-by-book deadline is missed it can go by unnoticed. Another aspect of productivity in relation to the calendar is that looking ahead three years from the date of beginning an OLM lectionary project, we know exactly how much translation is likely to be done by that time.

- (6) The lectionary offers a means of achieving the pastoral link necessary for the successful introduction and acceptance of the Scriptures. Hugh Milton Coke (1978) in his *Ethnohistory of Bible Translation among the Maya* makes a statement which he credits to Edmonds, a secretary for the British and Foreign Bible Society: "In every case where vernacular scriptures were successfully introduced, the men who made the versions had a pastoral link, official or voluntary, with the people for whom they made them." Where an expatriate translator comes to assist an established national church, building such a pastoral link is not always possible. Furthermore, many of today's translators approach the task trained as professional linguists, not as professional Christian ministers. In these situations, the translator can have a pastoral link with the people through the clergy and church structure which sponsor and use the lectionary translations.

Coke attributes another pertinent statement to Edmonds: "No Bible can be permanent that does not spring out of the actual necessities of a living church." The lectionary is a basic necessity of the living liturgical church.

Balancing initial quality with acceptance and use in planning a lectionary project

From the last two sections we have seen that the disadvantages of following a lectionary schedule in planning a translation program relate to sacrificing quality. The advantages relate to ensuring greater acceptance and use of results.

The advantages and disadvantages of a book-by-book approach in the context of a lectionary-using church are just the reverse. The advantages relate to ensuring better quality work. The disadvantages relate to reducing the likelihood of acceptance and use.

Therefore we must accept a trade-off between quality and acceptance when implementing a translation program among lectionary-using churches. If we think only of quality we might spend five or ten (or more) years translating a full New Testament and Old Testament selections using a book-by-book approach; and then when it was published in final form we could offer it to the local churches as a source for their lectionary readings. However, such a program would suffer from not having had the full use and feedback of the local churches during the time of the project. In particular, the quality of the translation would suffer from this lack, thus losing some of the advantage that the book-by-book approach originally offered. Such an approach might also risk ultimate rejection by a church that was put off by a translation program that did not cater to its expressed needs.

At the other extreme, we could be so keen to provide lectionary readings immediately for the local church, that the quality of the readings produced would be so poor as to make the result unacceptable to readers and hearers alike, thus losing the advantage that the lectionary approach originally offered.

To get the best advantages of both methods it is necessary to make a compromise, trading some loss of quality for some gain in use and acceptance. In considering this compromise, it is important to realize that we are talking about

settling for less quality *only in the trial editions* that are produced early in the project and used as the source for lectionary readings until the time many years later that final translations are published.

In putting together a compromise solution, all the potential disadvantages of the lectionary approach can be overcome by the same strategy—planning ahead and staying ahead.

If a lectionary translation program is launched only two or three months before the first reading is needed for use in church, then all of the problems discussed above are sure to occur. If, on the other hand, the translating is started well in advance of the first Sunday, many of the problems can be overcome. Beginning a full year in advance seems like it would give a reasonable balance. Beginning a year ahead of the need will certainly prevent last minute rushing. More importantly, it means that the translator has enough time to translate whole books in context so that the passages needed for the lectionary are pulled out of their full context rather than being translated in isolation. If whole books can be done in advance, then there is not a problem of having to fill in the gaps later. Starting well ahead of the first due date means that the translator can translate the entire gospel for the coming year before working on Epistle and Old Testament readings. Of course, the only way to prevent the above problem situations from occurring altogether, is to translate the whole Bible in advance. But as we have already discussed, doing so is likely to make the project miss out on the benefits of widespread use and acceptance while the translation is going on, and may even put at risk its acceptance after it is finished. Planning ahead and staying ahead seems to give the best trade-off which offers the benefits of both approaches.

Table 1 above gives a guide for planning ahead in a lectionary translation program based on the OLM. The final column tells which year of the three year cycle a particular book is used in, and thus indicates the point at which it is appropriate to translate the book. The "Per cent coverage" column tells how much of the book is actually used in the lectionary, and therefore gives an idea of how much pay-off there is likely to be in translating the whole book in advance. For instance, in the trade-off between the extra time needed to translate a whole book in advance and its potential benefit, translating the whole book is likely to give a greater pay-off for a book with at least 40% coverage than for a book with less than 20% coverage. As a minimum, an OLM lectionary translation project should plan to translate each of the synoptic gospels in the year before they are actually needed for the lectionary.

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