

A. TEPOX

THE IMPORTANCE OF BECOMING WISE: Proverbs 1.1-7

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In this article I want to consider the opening section of the Book of Proverbs (1.1-7), with a particular focus on the problems for translators in the different terms for “wisdom” (1.2-6), in the light of some translation trends during the last forty years.

I first want to look at this brief introductory passage in three smaller units, namely:

- The opening heading (verse 1)
- The general purpose of the book (verses 2-6)
- The key theme (verse 7)

After that I will add a brief discussion on the different ways these verses have been translated, in order to highlight the way a new Spanish version has approached the problem these seven verses pose for any translator.

The heading

The heading “Proverbs of Solomon ...” can apply either to this passage alone (1.1-7), or to the whole series of passages that begin here and end at 9.18. Or it may even apply to the whole book, which is the view held by the average reader.

For the purpose of the following study, I suggest that the application of the heading can be limited to these seven verses only, as an introduction to 1.1–9.18. The basis for this suggestion is the fact that two other collections of proverbs later in the book (10.1–22.16 and 25.1–29.27) also have headings that label them as “Proverbs of Solomon”. From the standpoint of discourse analysis it is possible to argue that each of these different section headings was intended to identify a collection in its own right.

The general purpose of the book

The general purpose of the Book of Proverbs is eloquently stated in verses 2-6, in a series of verbs and nouns that share a common component of meaning, namely, that of **acquiring wisdom**. Let us take a look at each noun and verb in the passage, and the various rendering and equivalents found for each in the different lexicons that are available.

For the purpose of this study I will divide the passage in two parts, verses 2-4 and verses 5-6, for the following reasons: In verses 2-4 there are four verbs in the infinitive (*yada'*, *bin*, *laqach*, *nathan*), linked to eleven nouns (*chokmah*, *musar*, *binah*, *haskel*, *tsedeq*, *mishpat*, *meysarim*, *'ormah*, *da'ath*, and *mezimah*). Then in verses 5-6 there seems to be a shift in the discourse marked by three other verbs in the imperfect (*shama'*, *yasaf*, and *qanah*) and one in a causative form (*habin*), linked to six other nouns (*leqach*, *tachbuloth*, *mashal*, *melitsah*, *dibre*, *chokamim*, and *chidot*).

All the verbs and nouns in this brief passage have their own particular shades of meaning, but each seems to be there in order to stress the

importance of becoming wise. The English equivalents of the above terms are:

<i>yada'</i>	to know (but also to understand, to find out, to become acquainted with)
<i>bin</i>	to understand (but also to perceive, to consider, to notice)
<i>laqach</i>	to take (but also to lay hold of, to seize, to acquire)
<i>nathan</i>	to give (but also to offer, to surrender)
<i>shama'</i>	to hear (but also to listen to, to heed, and to understand)
<i>yasaf</i>	to gather (but also to add and to take in)
<i>qanah</i>	to gain (but also to acquire and to buy)
<i>habin</i>	to gain insight (but also to comprehend, to be able to discern)

These basic meanings can of course be modified by the particular contexts in which they may occur. For instance, *yada'* can also mean "to recognize" (Exo 6.7), "to have intercourse with" (Gen 4.1), and even "to be concerned about" (Psa 1.6).

As for the nouns, here are their generally accepted English equivalents:

<i>chokmah</i>	wisdom (also skill, aptitude, experience, and good sense)
<i>musar</i>	correction (also discipline, education, instruction, and even warning, reminder and chastisement)
<i>binah</i>	insight (in this particular case, as a modifier of <i>imrey</i> "words", it may also mean perception)
<i>haskel</i>	intelligence (also insight and understanding)
<i>tsedeq</i>	justice (also what is right)
<i>mishpat</i>	justice (also good judgment and just sentence)
<i>mesharim</i>	rectitude (also order, uprightness, and regulation)
<i>'ormah</i>	cunning (also craftiness and slyness)
<i>da'ath</i>	knowledge (also ability and insight)
<i>mezimah</i>	shrewdness (also evil plan, plot, intrigue, and even prudence)
<i>leqach</i>	insight (also teaching and gift of persuasion)
<i>tachbuloth</i>	shrewd guidance
<i>mashal</i>	proverb
<i>melitsah</i>	allusive saying (also mockery, irony, and satire)
<i>dibre chokamim</i>	wise sayings
<i>chida (chidoth)</i>	riddle (also intrigue, ambiguous saying)

The repeated addition of other equivalents for these terms ("also" ...) may seem to be idle. However, the underlying idea is to stress the well-known fact that words are not limited to one single meaning, but that usually their range of meaning extends over to other fields, thus allowing for what is known as linguistic creativity. And yet this basic truth appears to be ignored in the actual practice of communication and of translation.

The key theme

We may say that verse 7 is both the key theme of this brief passage (and of the whole book, for that matter) and the sum total of the meanings of each of the different terms listed above, which in lesser or greater degree all stress the need for young people to become wise. The wide expression of the idea of wisdom that has been developed in the previous five verses is here summarized in a brief and beautiful climax. In only four words the author of this discourse has effectively summarized the core of wisdom:

Yir'ath YHWH reshith da'ath
 ("Fear of Yahweh, beginning of knowledge")

In order for this idea to be clearly highlighted, the previous verses must be translated adequately. But as we will see, this has not generally been the case.

Some approaches to translation

This will not pretend to be an exhaustive presentation of every translational approach in the last forty years. I only want to point out the most outstanding approaches, which have one thing in common: their literalness.

The literal approach

Whoever reads any of the traditional versions of the Bible can see that the biblical languages are usually rendered on a word-by-word basis. Let us take, for instance, the NASB rendering of Proverbs 1.2-6:

To know wisdom and instruction,
 To discern the sayings of understanding,
 To receive instruction in wise behavior,
 Righteousness, justice and equity;
 To give prudence to the naïve,
 To the youth knowledge and discretion,
 A wise man will hear and increase in learning,
 And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,
 To understand a proverb and a figure,
 The words of the wise and their riddles.

The above rendering of the Hebrew text is impeccable – for classroom purposes, that is! However, it leaves much to be desired for those of us who have been doing translation work for the last forty years!

The NIV rendering is no less literal, even though it has changed the infinitive verbs to a participle form (something the Hebrew form allows), thus reflecting a little more creativity:

for attaining wisdom and discipline;
 for understanding words of insight;
 for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life;
 doing what is right and just and fair;

for giving prudence to the simple,
 knowledge and discretion to the young –
let the wise listen and add to their learning,
 and let the discerning get guidance –
for understanding proverbs and parables,
 the sayings and riddles of the wise.

In spite of their apparent differences, both NASB and NIV (and other versions of the same kind) have in common a literal approach which has an underlying theological motivation, namely, that of achieving a faithful and consistent rendering of each word of the inspired text.

The dynamic equivalence approach

Some forty years ago a new approach to translation was introduced, which led to the release of a number of new versions of the Bible. Known as the “dynamic equivalence” approach, it endeavored to render the meaning of the biblical text in today’s common language. Content was given priority over form, even though form often managed to survive. Here is what *The Good News Bible* (GNB) did in Proverbs 1.2-6:

Here are proverbs that will help you to recognize wisdom and good advice, and understand sayings with deep meaning. They can teach you how to live intelligently and how to be honest, just and fair. They can make an inexperienced person clever and teach young men how to be resourceful. These proverbs can even add to the knowledge of wise men and give guidance to the educated, so that they can understand the hidden meanings of proverbs and the problems that wise men raise.

This kind of approach was certainly a breakthrough in translation theory and practice, but evidently it could not go beyond its own time. One of the leading proponents of this approach once said, “People are still not ready for more.” If many copies of the new GNB were burned and buried by extreme conservatives, we can only guess what those people would have done if GNB had done “more”!

While recognizing the tremendous contribution of GNB and other versions like it, a closer examination of Proverbs 1.1-7 shows that GNB still retained the same verbs and nouns found in the Hebrew text: “recognize”, “understand”, “teach”, “add”, “give guidance”, as well as “wisdom”, “good advice”, “sayings with deep meaning”, “intelligence” (developed as “how to live intelligently”), “honesty”, “justice”, “fairness”, “cleverness”, “resourcefulness”, “knowledge”, “guidance”, “education”, “hidden meanings”, and “problems”. There was an evident departure from the actual form of the original, but there was also an attachment to the actual order of every single word. What is even more important is that there was no recognition of the poetical characteristics of the material being translated! (At that time, a leading translation expert used to say, “Among English speakers, reading and/or writing poetry is considered something stupid.”)

The creative or re-creative approach

In his article on “Philippine Poetry and Bible Translation”, Louis Dorn tells of his experience in the Tagalog translation of Proverbs 1.1-6 (in *Translating Old Testament Poetry*, Zogbo and Wendland editors). While the translators did use poetic forms in the overall translation of this book, Dorn stresses the fact that this passage was “translated as a prose introduction”. He makes the comment that this “is not the kind of material one would work into standard proverb form in Tagalog”. But he also adds that at least one of the translators felt “it would have been good to use poetic form here”, even if “for other reasons”.

The above case illustrates the fact that this piece of discourse calls for careful study in order to make a wise decision as to how to translate it. Translators can either exaggerate the poetic characteristics of this text, and thereby reproduce the Hebrew text in small pieces of prose labeled “poetic lines”, or else follow the steps of the Tagalog translators and render it as sheer prose, thus robbing the text of its originally intended impact.

In discussing stylistic matches, Zogbo and Wendland (*Translating Old Testament Poetry*) give us interesting, suggestive ideas with regards to biblical poetry, with a view to enabling the Bible translator to translate poetry as poetry. Of special interest for my argument in this article is their discussion of “collapsing” for style and naturalness. While at one point they advocate literalness, almost immediately they make room for freer approaches, one of them being “re-creation”. They say:

In this method, the translator first studies the poem, and tries to understand all the poetic devices in the original poem as well as the original message. Then, with much more freedom, translators-poets “re-create” in their own language and in their own words, a poem which is equivalent to the original. The goal is to write a poem that has the same purpose and the same message, and which would also convey the same impact and emotions (section 5.6.3).

It is in this spirit of “much more freedom” that a team of Spanish translators has been working for the last few years on a new translation, which for the time being is called *Biblia en Lenguaje Sencillo* (BLS, “the Bible in Plain Language”). Years ago *Dios Habla Hoy* was a breakthrough in Bible translation in Spanish, as one of the various Bible Society versions of the Bible in common language. In a couple of years from now, BLS is likely to be another breakthrough, although this time it will go a little farther. Here is what has been done in Proverbs 1.1-7:

¹ *Estos son los proverbios de Salomón, hijo de David, rey de Israel.*

²⁻⁴ *Estos proverbios tienen como propósito
que ustedes, los jóvenes,
lleguen a ser sabios,
corrijan su conducta
y entiendan palabras
bien dichas y bien pensadas.*

*También sirven para enseñar
a los que no tienen experiencia,
a fin de que sean cuidadosos,
honrados y justos en todo;
que muestren astucia y conocimiento,
y piensen bien lo que hacen.*

5 *Ustedes, los sabios e inteligentes,
escuchen lo que voy a decirles.
Así se harán más sabios
y ganarán experiencia.*

6 *Asm podrán entender
lo que es un proverbio
lo que es un ejemplo,
y lo que es una adivinanza.*

7 *Todo el que quiera ser sabio
Debe empezar por obedecer a Dios.
Pero la gente ignorante
no quiere ser corregida
ni llegar a ser sabia.*

In the spirit of “re-creation” in which the above translation was done, an English rendering which would attempt to reproduce the spirit of the Spanish text would be like this:

¹ These are the proverbs of Solomon, a son of David, Israel’s king.

²⁻⁴ It is their purpose
That you, young people,
May come to be wise,
May straighten up your behavior
And may also understand words
That are well thought and well said.

These proverbs serve as well
To teach those with no experience,
So they can take care of themselves,
And be just and honest in everything.
So they may show they are smart and knowledgeable,
And think over what they do.

5 Those of you who are wise and intelligent,
Listen to what I want to tell you.
You will thus become wiser
And will gain more experience.

6 You will thus be able to understand
The difference between a proverb,
An example, and a riddle.

7 Whoever wants to become wise
Must begin by obeying God.

But ignorant people
 Don't want to be corrected
 Nor do they want to become wise.

The above English rendering will certainly appear to be wordy. Actually, the original Hebrew text is essentially wordy. Just imagine, eight verbs and seventeen nouns to say only one and the same thing: **These proverbs were written for you to become wise.** Such, in fact, is the basic meaning of the entire passage.

How did the translators arrive at such rendering?

First, they noticed that all the nouns had much the same meaning: wisdom, insight, intelligence, cunning, knowledge, shrewdness, and so on. Likewise, all the verbs also had much the same meaning: to know, to understand, to pay attention (to hear), to gain, to gather. So rather than trying to find a particular equivalent for each term, they focused their attention on their shared meaning. So – they reasoned – as long as the basic meaning was retained, they felt free to restructure the word order.

Secondly, they noticed the five-times repeated Hebrew preposition *l-*, which here indicates either the infinitive mood or a participial form, but which also can be translated as “to” and “for”. They decided to take this preposition as a statement of purpose.

Thirdly, they noticed that the Hebrew text had some poetic rhythm and cadence, so they decided to try and see if they could give these verses some poetical flavor. One thing in their favor was that classical Spanish poetry allows for lines with one, two, three, or more syllables, as long as the longest line does not exceed sixteen syllables. Even those who try free verse usually don't write lines longer than this generally accepted limit.

The poetry of the above verses is far from being classical. But it does have rhythm and cadence, plus a regular meter. Since it is basically team poetry, it lacks the flavor a good single poet could give to it. And yet it is easy to read and easy to listen to, which is the main concern of this new version. Improvements can still be made, but from a translational standpoint it can be said that the basic components of meaning of this discourse have been retained and that it is a fairly good rendering of the Hebrew text.

How far can translators go, especially Bible translators? That is the question. The answer may be: as far as they are able to, provided they still do justice to the text. And this is what the BLS translators appear to have done.

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“LO” and “BEHOLD” – translating the Hebrew word *hinneh*

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The Hebrew word *hinneh* is traditionally translated as either “behold” or “lo” in RSV and many other English Bibles. This simple approach in English may be deceptive for translators in other languages, since