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“ORACLE OF YAHWEH”: TRANSLATING A HIGHLY MARKED EXPRESSION

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Ne'um YHWH occurs over 350 times in the Hebrew Bible. Many French versions translate it by the equivalent of “oracle of Yahweh” or “oracle of the Lord” but few English versions do. Several English versions use expressions such as “declares the Lord” or “says the Lord”. Many contemporary versions use less marked sentence structures such as “The Lord has spoken”; omit representation of the Hebrew structure when it occurs frequently within a section; and often represent the expression as being spoken by YHWH as in “I the Lord of the universe, I declare it”.¹ Such renderings are neither functionally equivalent translations of *ne'um YHWH* nor necessary for a common language approach. In English, the more formally-equivalent rendering of each occurrence of *ne'um YHWH* by “oracle of Yahweh” is also more functionally equivalent.

In this paper, I will use Today's English Version (TEV) and Français Courant (FC) to exemplify how some contemporary versions handle *ne'um YHWH*. One reason is that these are in two languages that I know fairly well. But another important reason is that although they are intended as models for translators, they are often translated quite literally. As a result, the handling of problematic expressions such as “oracle of Yahweh” is rather mechanically reproduced in many other languages when alternative ways should have been at least considered.

***Ne'um YHWH*: a highly marked expression**

Samuel Meier's² extended analysis of *ne'um YHWH* indicates that it is a highly marked expression. Orthographically, “the Masoretic vocalization presents a pattern unique in the language”. Syntactically, its “interrupting, and closing quoted speech while in construct with a proper name...is without parallel in Hebrew”.

1 For example: Today's English Version, Contemporary English Version, Living Bible, Français Courant, Dios Habla Hoy, Habari Njema.

2 S. Meier, *Speaking of Speaking: Marking Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Bible*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1992. The direct quotes in this paragraph are taken from pp 209, 299, and 306, in that order.

Lexically, *ne'um* was probably archaic when used by Amos¹, let alone the exilic and post-exilic prophets. Rhetorically, “Hebrew does not characteristically repunctuate quoted discourse with reminders of the quote’s source, making this particle’s function quite distinctive and certainly unique in its frequency and distribution. The redundancy becomes in some later biblical texts exceedingly verbose and even obtrusive...”

The expression functions not to identify the speaker of a discourse, as many contemporary versions’ translation would suggest, but to insist on the authenticity of the words as having YHWH as their source and as being transmitted in legitimate prophetic tradition. In exilic and post-exilic texts, its use, especially its repeated use in brief passages, emphasizes the validity and importance of the prophetic word.²

Functional non-equivalence: making marked forms unmarked

In FC, and to a greater extent in TEV, the highly marked form *ne'um YHWH* is translated as an unmarked speech formula, both lexically and stylistically. The versions use both nominal and verbal expressions to translate the formulaic expression. FC uses a wide variety of speech verbs to translate *ne'um*; for example, the equivalents of “ask”, “affirm”, and “promise”.

The two versions misrepresent the speech situation in which *ne'um YHWH* is used. The prophets used (or are portrayed as using) the formula—often in the face of a skeptical, even hostile audience who had heard more gratifying messages from other prophets—to insist on the source and the validity of their message. It is always the prophet who uses the formula, never YHWH. However, FC and TEV often translate this formula as if YHWH himself was insisting on the validity of the words. In Haggai, for example, FC translates the formula as being spoken by YHWH in 11 of the 13 times that it occurs.

Translating *ne'um YHWH* in the first person with YHWH as speaker is uncritically accepted in the UBS *Handbook on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*.³ The handbook also supports TEV’s use of two different clauses (“The LORD said” and “I, the LORD have spoken”) to translate *ne'um YHWH* in Zeph 1.2-3, making the highly questionable claim: “This is more appropriate in English, both to avoid dull repetition and to mark the close of the subsection.” The handbook does not consider the formulaic nature of the phrase, whether or not its use was literarily “dull” in the Hebrew, the function of its repetition in Hebrew, or how the repetition could be represented in English in a way that is not “dull”.

1 Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1977, 143.

2 For example: Robert Carroll, *Jeremiah* (Old Testament Library), Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1986, 148; Walter Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (Hermeneia), Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1979 (translated by R.E. Clements), 176; Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 128; Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8* (Anchor Bible), vol 1, New York: Doubleday 1987, 173; Meier, *op. cit.*, 314; John Barton, “Postexilic Prophecy”, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday 1992, 5.494.

3 147; the last sentence of the handbook’s relevant paragraph could even be misread as implying that the Hebrew phrase uses the first person. The handbook on the Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah does not deal with the problem, probably for at least two reasons: the expression occurs only twice each in Obadiah and Micah and not at all in Jonah; the handbook uses TEV, rather than RSV, as the basic reference text.

More functionally equivalent renderings

“Now be strong, O Zerubbabel”—Oracle of Yahweh.

“And be strong, O Joshua ben-Jehozadak, O High Priest, and be strong, all you people of the land.”—Oracle of Yahweh.

“Indeed I will be with you.”—Oracle of Yahweh of Hosts.

(Meyers and Meyers’ translation of Hag 2.4)

Meyers and Meyers’ translation of Hag 2.4 is quite similar to that of *La Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible* in its use of hyphenation and quotation marks, its use of “oracle” to translate *ne’um YHWH*, and its representing each occurrence of the Hebrew phrase. The use of “oracle” is a marked reference to speech, but so is *ne’um*; “oracle” is a religious word suggesting mysterious communication between God and man, as *ne’um* is when occurring with “of Yahweh”. The repeated use of *ne’um YHWH* is obtrusive in the English; but it is in the original text as well, by biblical Hebrew’s own literary standards. The translation clearly indicates that the formula is not part of Yahweh’s speech. In short, this more formally equivalent translation of *ne’um YHWH* is much closer to being a functional equivalent than TEV, which completely omits it, and FC, which translates it as if spoken by YHWH:

TEV: But now don’t be discouraged, any of you. Do the work, for I am with you.

FC: So, I, the Lord, tell you: Be courageous, Zerubbabel! Be courageous, Joshua, you who are the high priest! Be courageous, all of you in the country! Get to work. I promise you that I’ll be with you: I, the Lord of the universe. (My translation)

Assuming that the original audience would have perceived the repetition as a means of heavily underlining the source and reliability of the message, this function of the repeated structure might be made more readily apparent to the contemporary English speaker by modifying Meyers and Meyers’ translation as follows:

This oracle comes from Yahweh: “Now be strong, O Zerubbabel!”

This too is Yahweh’s oracle: “Be strong, O Joshua ben-Jehozadak, O High Priest! Be strong, all you people of the land!”

Yes, the oracle is from Yahweh of Hosts: “Indeed I will be with you.”

The deictic aspect of the expression is made explicit and rhetorical intensification is achieved. A trace of the formulaic nature of the Hebrew phrase remains with the constant use of “oracle” and “Yahweh” but the varied sentence structures diminish this aspect.

The use of a common speech verb as in many English versions, with the support of the Septuagint, may somewhat diminish the functional equivalence but would still enable a translation that is more functionally equivalent than in many contemporary versions:

“Now be strong, O Zerubbabel”—it’s Yahweh who says this!

“Be strong, O Joshua ben-Jehozadak, O High Priest! Be strong, all you people of the land!” It’s Yahweh who says this!

Indeed, it’s Yahweh of the Armies who says: “I will be with you.”

Conclusion

A functionally equivalent translation is not necessarily one that uses the simplest, most concise language possible and avoids unusual structures. In common language as well as literary translations, functional equivalence may be obtained through the creative use of language, including unusual structures and vocabulary, and referentially unnecessary repetition. Such tactics occur in the everyday speech of all languages as well as in the ancient, written texts of biblical Hebrew.

JAN DE WAARD

THE SEPTUAGINT OF PROVERBS AS A TRANSLATIONAL MODEL?

The author is a former UBS translation consultant. This is a slightly reworked text of a paper presented to the Symposium of Orthodox Biblical Scholars held at Athens, September 1-3, 1997.

Introduction

It is no secret that one cannot speak of *the* Septuagint as a single translation, but only about the translation of a particular book of the Septuagint, or maybe of one smaller corpus of books like the Dodekapropheton or Minor Prophets. This explains our choice of one book, Proverbs, for the present discussion. However, there are three main practical reasons behind this option as well. The first one simply is that being the editor of Proverbs in the next edition of the *Biblia Hebraica*, provisionally known as BHQ, I had to make entirely new collations of all ancient witnesses, and to find out their particular translation skills and techniques after having eliminated all incidences possibly due to differences of Hebrew Vorlage. A second reason is that we do not have a critical edition of the Septuagint of Proverbs and probably will not have one during the next century. Finally, the Greek translation of Proverbs is a paradise for translational exercises, for the Greek translator is capable of both the best and the worst.

I tried to organize my examples in different domains such as explicit, implicit, and specific information, cultural adaptation, figurative language, idioms, unambiguous exegetical options and restructuring, but any classification is to some extent arbitrary and mainly a matter of convenience. Everywhere I have tried to answer the question of translational model. Only at the end of the presentation is more focus given to a contrastive model which is not recommended. The few conclusions at the very end are intended to stimulate further research of a theoretical and practical nature.

Explicitness and implicitness of information

A literal translation of the Hebrew of 16.8 (= 15.29a LXX) would run as follows: "Better a little with righteousness than a great income without justice".

In the first member the Greek translator makes *λήμψις* "receipt" explicit: *κρείσσων ὀλίγη λήμψις μετὰ δικαιοσύνης ἢ πολλὰ γενήματα μετὰ ἀδικίας* "Better a small *receipt* with righteousness than a great income with unrighteousness". It is clear why the translator has made *λήμψις* explicit: it is in order to match *γενήματα* in the second member. Here, as in many other instances, the translator does not like a lack of stylistic balance.