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THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRANSLATOR'S TREATMENT OF BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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A dynamic equivalence (or "meaningful") translation is intended to give the reader all the information necessary to understand the meaning of the original text as the original readers understood it, while at the same time respecting the literary integrity of the text itself and not introducing information foreign to the original message. Much has been said and written on the problem of "how far to go" in making explicit, for the readers of the translation, background information that the original readers already knew and which the original writer therefore did not need to explain. This article discusses certain aspects of this problem, especially as it is related to the concept we have of the Bible itself and of its function in evangelism and in the church.

But to approach the matter from this point of view really plunges us into the field of ecclesiology, or theology of the church, since the view we have of the church will inevitably influence our view of how the Bible is to be used. In turn, this will influence the way in which it is to be translated. We may begin by contrasting two different principles, both of which are sound enough if they are kept in balance but which can become misleading if either is emphasized to the point of excluding the other.

(1) Historically, the Bible has functioned as **a book of the church**: produced, under divine guidance, **by** the believing community and **for** that community to use in its proclamation and teaching ministry. The Old Testament writings were produced by members of the people of Irael and were directed to that people. The New Testament letters were directed to churches or to Christians who were active in them, and the Gospels were written for use by the church in its witness.

From this point of view the Bible, when used for evangelism and outreach, is seen as a tool for use **by the church**, and its message takes on greater meaning when it is used together with the living witness of believers and the church's teaching ministry. This concept of the Bible's function has been general throughout Christian history. It may have been abused, as in the Middle Ages, when translation of the Bible into the language of the people was discouraged or forbidden, under the illusion that only the clergy could rightly interpret it. But throughout the history of the church and of missions, when the Bible has been translated into new languages it has usually been as a response to the needs of a witnessing church.

(2) With the Protestant Reformation there came an emphasis on the Bible as the sole and sufficient rule of faith and practice, and there was

an insistence upon personal freedom and judgment by the individual—even though, of course, the guidance of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit was considered essential. The Enlightenment of the 18th century further stressed this right of private judgment. These trends have led to increasing emphasis upon the **use of the Bible by the individual**, whether he or she reads it under the guidance of a particular church or simply as a private reader; and in recent years the insistence upon "easy access to sacred Scripture" among Catholics has led to increasing use of the Scriptures by people of this confession.

This emphasis on the personal use of the Bible of course need not (in fact, should not) lead to neglect of its function in the context of the church. However, in some Protestant circles today, including many that are actively involved in mission to unevangelized peoples, there has been what can only be described as a tendency to de-emphasize the importance of the church as such. The emphasis tends to be more upon the individual believer—or, at best, on the Christian group as the sum of its believing individuals, rather than upon the church or believing community as a body which, in a very real sense, is more than the sum of its individual parts. In some groups this emphasis is derived in part from the teaching of those who, since the middle of the 19th century, have taken a "dispensational" approach which teaches that in the present age the church, in its "visible" form, is destined to apostasy and that the "true church" is composed of regenerate individuals within, or independently of, the "visible church". Each individual is accordingly responsible for his or her own study and understanding of the Bible, if not apart from the church, at least with an emphasis upon individual more than upon corporate responsibility.

Furthermore, in our own time, the Bible—or portions, or even fragments, of it—has come into use for wide distribution to non-Christians as well as to Christians, and is being looked upon as an instrument of evangelism in its own right. This is due in part to the opportunities provided by widespread literacy, as well as to the development of printing and, now, of cassette recordings and other electronic media. All of these can make the Scriptures directly available to the reader (or listener) whether inside or outside the Christian community. This use of the Bible is also related to the fact that when the mass media are used in evangelism, many of the persons addressed are not in contact with any church, and are urged to make an individual response.

However, if the response to the Gospel is to lead to a genuine and lasting life transformation, it is important that the person ultimately become related to some kind of believing community, from which he or she can get encouragement and instruction in the Christian faith. It is true that many cases can be cited in which the Scriptures alone have led to individual conversions; but when these conversions have proved lasting the persons have usually either found fellowship in an existing body of

believers or, where no such body is present, have become involved in the formation of a new Christian community which, in turn, has helped nurture their own faith. In either case, their use of the Bible and their spiritual growth has been in a church context. (There are, of course, special situations, such as those of religious persecution in which an individual Christian is in forced isolation from other Christians, or in which an outward profession of faith is virtually impossible for survival; but such circumstances are exceptional and do not negate the overall principle that Christians are meant to live in community.)

Both in the case of a lack of sufficient emphasis on the function of the church, and also where there is a positive emphasis on today's possibilities for placing the Scriptures in the hands of people as individuals, there may tend to develop an attitude that the Bible, in and of itself, is meant to function as the most effective instrument of both evangelism and instruction. In such cases, and especially where there is not a serious estimate of the role of the teaching and witnessing church, it is only natural for the translator to feel that, at all costs, each particular passage of Scripture must be made crystal clear for the untaught reader. It is easy to forget that such passages, when first written, were directed to those within the church—to be used in their witness to those outside, to be sure. It may be well to remember that the Ethiopian official, although he was an educated man, said of the Isaiah passage, "How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?" If the reader is expected to understand the translation without someone explaining it, the translator naturally feels that it must be perfectly clear, if at all possible, even to the non-Christian reader or to one who has never seen it before. And so he therefore feels obliged to insert certain extra details and background information, and this sometimes distorts the central focus of a passage or at least violates its literary integrity. What was intended as a translation becomes a sort of targum, or text-with-commentary; and in preparing it, the translator may also stumble into the pitfall of introducing a personal theological interpretation at points where it is felt that the reader will need explanation.

Furthermore, what was a concise and straightforward explanation or narrative in the original may become, at the hands of the translator, heavy and difficult to read, for the very people for whom it is intended.

What information should be added?

But granting that the Scriptures are in fact being placed in the hands of unchurched people, for whom much of the Bible's cultural, historical, and religious background is strange or even unknown, how can this gap in their understanding be bridged? Although we must recognize the need for a teaching church for the reader's fuller understanding of the message, it is still necessary that at least some of the information that the original writers and their readers both knew about (but that is not known to the readers of the translation) be included in some form or other, by

way of supplementary information.

A meaningful translation can and should supply several types of information within the text of the translation itself. The following are some examples. (1) Information required by the grammar and vocabulary of the language, such as inclusive/exclusive first person, older/younger brother, and so on, without which the language just cannot function if it requires such distinctions. (2) Participants in the action, which must often be referred to by name even when they are not directly specified in the original, as with event words that are nouns in the original but are expressed as active verbs in the translation (for example, "forgiveness of sins" may need to be translated as "God forgives people their sins"). (3) Certain events or attributes may need to be made clear (as when "city of David" is translated as "city where David was born", to avoid the idea of a city possessed by David). (4) Classifiers may need to be used with proper names, such as "river Jordan", or with names of unfamiliar objects, such as "perfume called myrrh" (especially if a loan word is used). (5) Descriptive phrases are sometimes needed, such as "worship-house of the Jews" for synagogue. These and many other details can often be included in the translation itself without interrupting the flow of the language or distorting the passage.

But a more serious problem arises when the biblical text makes reference to historical events, customs, quotations from another part of the Bible, or religious concepts which the reader needs to understand in order to adequately appreciate the meaning. Much of this information is simply too lengthy to be introduced into the text itself without upsetting the focus of the passage or turning the reader's attention away from its main meaning. Even briefer items of information such as word-plays, meanings of proper names, dates, biblical references, definitions of unusual terms, and so on, usually cannot be written into the text itself if we are to present it in a translation that reflects the way the author wrote to the original readers, since for them such information would have seemed not only unnecessary but quite out of place.

The problem of bringing in this kind of information was discussed by Lars Lode in *The Bible Translator* for January 1984 and in a rejoinder by Philip Stine in the same issue. Lode admits that some of the information he refers to might be put into footnotes, but discourages this procedure on the basis that new readers may not know how to use footnotes. This is, of course, a very real problem; but if we look at the translation as something to be used together with the witness and teachings of the church, the problem is not quite as serious: part of the church's teaching ministry can be to teach people how to use footnotes! And much background information of a general nature can be given in brief introductions to the books of the Bible and in glossaries and other helps for which also the church will need to help teach readers regarding their use, if they are to be most effective. Wayne Gill, "Further Considerations for the Presentation of New Material", *TBT*, January

1985, pages 134-135, refers to the use of "teaching outlines" as well as to the selection of Old Testament materials for translation, thereby recognizing the function of the church in selecting and supplying such background information for the reader.

Our theology of the church may also influence the way in which the Scriptures are published and distributed, especially when biblical fragments are printed in the form of brief selections such as those that are widely circulated by the Bible Societies. Present UBS guidelines insist that selections, as well as book-length portions, are accompanied by appropriate introductions, although this norm has not yet been put into practice as widely as desired. In fact, it is a bit difficult to plan an "introduction" to a one-page selection, for example, without making it too long in proportion to the text itself. But many such selections can be almost meaningless to the reader without at least some bit of explanation to introduce them, giving the setting of the passage, the occasion of the parable, an identification of the speaker, and so on. Sometimes a slight change can be made in the opening sentence of the text of a selection, to give some of this information; but unless the material is such as to be really transparent to the reader when removed from its wider context, some additional indication needs to be given. And even with such indications, when passages are chosen for people outside the church there needs to be much care, and they need to be used in such a way as to attract their readers to the church or to some source of orientation and witness within the Christian community. (See the provocative discussion in Mathew P. John, "The Bible, Inside the Church and Outside: The Theology of Scripture and the Philosophy of Distribution", *The Bible Distributor*, December 1983.)

LOUIS DORN

THE UNEXPECTED AS A SPEECH DEVICE: SHIFTS OF THEMATIC EXPECTANCY IN JEREMIAH

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Jeremiah often uses figures and standard expressions which normally convey the theme of well-being, but he shifts their use to convey the theme of evil, punishment, or doom. In this article we will refer to this kind of shift as a **shift of thematic expectancy**. The translator must be alert to such shifts of expectancy, especially in those instances where the shift comes as a surprise.

Jeremiah's situation

When the prophet Jeremiah was bringing his message to the people of