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# The Concept of a sacred language: help or hindrance in New Testament translation?

Paul Garnet

In England there have been two distinct traditional approaches to the translation of ancient texts. The "Oxford" approach aimed at expressing the thought of the original in good English idiom. The translation was not necessarily word-for-word. The "Cambridge" approach, on the other hand, produced a much more literal translation and aimed at showing how the meaning had been arrived at. This was the method naturally favoured by school teachers, because mistakes would then be obvious and could be corrected<sup>1</sup>. The value of the Cambridge tradition is still acknowledged, but usually this is only in connection with this pedagogical need. Almost all biblical translation is now done under the guidance of very sophisticated developments of the Oxford tradition. In what follows, I shall argue that, however useful the Oxford tradition may be for a multitude of reasons, the Cambridge tradition should be maintained in parallel with this, since it has two important functions besides the pedagogical.

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1. Modern translation theorists have come up with their own precisely defined terms which are more or less tantamount to the older Oxford/Cambridge, non-literal/literal distinctions respectively: "dynamic equivalence"/"formal equivalence" (Nida), "communicative translation"/"semantic translation" (Newmark). The new terms do not always fit the old distinctions exactly, however. For instance, Newmark's "semantic translation" is not necessarily briefer and more literal. (*Approaches to Translation*, Oxford, Pergamon, 1981, p. 53).

I. The term "sacred language" could refer to any of the following, or to a combination:

A) A language which is to be used only for sacred purposes; for example, Hebrew is not used as a secular language by certain orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, because it is considered sacred. Of itself, this has no effect on the translation of sacred texts.

B) A language in which the sacred text must remain, because it can be understood properly only in that "sacred" language. An example would be the Latin Bible in the Middle Ages. This view of a sacred language is likely to be associated with the existence of a sacred group, who alone can interpret the texts correctly. Obviously such a conception would tend to discourage translation of sacred texts, as such translators as William Tyndale found at the cost of their lives.

C) A modified form of normal speech in which a given sacred text was written and which a certain group used, when talking of sacred matters. The New Testament Greek grammarian, Nigel Turner, has concluded that there was indeed such a language as biblical Greek, which differed from the common secular Greek of the time. This language was influenced by the Septuagint version of the Old Testament and was used by the writers of the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Obviously an important characteristic of it was the presence of Hebraisms. This concept is important in translating the New Testament. Unlike a) and b) above, it is not a doctrinal pre-supposition, but an empirical hypothesis for which considerable evidence has been adduced in the preface of Turner's *New Testament Greek Syntax*.<sup>3</sup>

D) A fourth possible meaning of the term "sacred language" follows from this. Turner has argued that biblical Greek derived from Septuagint usage. It follows that a prestigious translation of a sacred text can in point of fact create a sacred language. The nineteenth-century divine Christopher Wordsworth, in the preface to his commentary of Acts, pointed out the parallel between

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2. *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1965), pp. 182ff.

3. *Grammar of New Testament Greek III, Syntax* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1963).

the LXX and the KJV in their influence on their respective cultures, in spite of the imperfections of each of these translations.<sup>4</sup> Has there been a biblical English, just as there was a biblical Greek? Could it be of use to the Bible translator?

## II. The case of Lk. 4.22

A) The *Traduction œcuménique de la Bible* (TOB) renders the crucial phrases in our verse more or less literally as follows: «Tous lui rendaient témoignage; ils s'étonnaient du message (lit. des paroles) de la grâce.»

B) Almost all other modern versions, however, have "spoke well of him" or the like, instead of "bore witness to him" and "beautiful words" instead of "words of grace".

C) This non-literal translation creates certain difficulties when read in the context.

(a) Jesus had just read some verses from the prophet Isaiah. He then closed the scroll and declared, "To-day this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing". If this was the sum total of his oral discourse, why would they be impressed by his eloquence?

(b) If verse 22 says merely that they were impressed with Jesus' eloquence, and remarked to one another that he was the son of Joseph, whom they knew, why would Jesus immediately turn against them, as in verses 23-27? Why would he upbraid them, after they had "spoken well" of him?

The second point could be answered by the comment that has often been made in connection with this verse, namely that it is characteristic of Jesus, when approached with appreciation or politeness, to ignore or rebuff this approach in favour of dealing

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4. C. Wordsworth, *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the Original Greek with Introduction and Notes: the Acts of the Apostles*, 5th edn. (London, Rivingtons, 1867), pp. 13-14.

with the deeper soul condition of the enquirer.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the first difficulty remains, that of the shortness of Jesus' speech.

D) Why has "bore witness to" been rendered by "spoke well of"? The fact is that whenever the term "witness to" occurs in the Lukan writings, it has a good connotation. It means witnessing on behalf of the person or thing. It denotes a testimony whose *effect* is positive for the person concerned, and usually connotes an *intention* to support the person. Now modern translators are very disposed to take connotations seriously. For instance, if one translates *gunai* literally as "woman" in Jn. 2.4, Jesus seems to be disrespectful to his mother, because "woman" in the vocative has had a bad connotation in modern English.<sup>6</sup> In so far as translators have looked to Lukan usage here, rather than for instance to the secular forensic usage of "witness", they have taken sacred language (sense "c" above) into consideration in their translation.

Why is "words of grace" rendered "eloquent words"? Here again we have the recognition of biblical language in the form of a Hebraism. Hebrew has few adjectives and uses abstract nouns in the equivalent of the genitive case instead. It says "throne of righteousness" instead of "righteous throne".<sup>7</sup> This has long been recognized. Indeed, Luther, Tyndale, the Geneva Bible and the KJV all render this term by "gracious words", or the like.

E) In spite of these considerations, I still find these renderings unsatisfying, for the following reasons.

(a) Whilst translation should be sensitive to connotations, this is no excuse to suppress the denotation and translate it without

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5. E.g. Mk. 10.17-19, Lk. 11.27-28, Jn. 3.2-3.

6. Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden, Brill, 1969), p. 95.

7. See list of instances in Turner, *Grammar*, p. 213.

any more ado by the connotation. There are many ways to express the connotation "they all spoke well of him" in any language. Luke has chosen to say, "they all bore him witness". "Witness" denotes something which is probably important for his meaning, as I hope to show later.

(b) The translators have seen the word **charis**, usually translated "grace", and have failed to respond with the thought that this is probably of theological significance. The reason is perhaps because the message "of grace" is not specifically the Christian gospel. Yet a regular term for the Christian era, "year of grace" appears, in effect, in verse 19: to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. If this is not the Christian gospel, at least the possibility should be envisaged that it is a national gospel for Israel and that the proclamation of this gospel is grace indeed for a people under the heel of Rome.

(c) Ironically both of these translations, which might be justified as taking seriously the kind of language used in the New Testament (i.e. biblical, sacred language) result in translations which remove theological terms from the text, for both witness and grace are important theologoumena for both Luke and the New Testament as a whole.

**III. Let us now look at a close parallel in Acts 14.3.** Here it is stated that the apostles preached boldly in Iconium and that the Lord "witnessed to the word of his grace" by giving them the power to perform miracles. Notice the following.

(a) Both terms, "witness to" and "word of grace", appear here as well as in Lk. 4.22.

(b) Both passages are by the same author.

(c) The situation in both passages is similar: synagogue preaching and the question of miracles. Notice too:

(d) "Word of his grace" cannot here mean "eloquent speech". "Grace" clearly refers to the contents of the message.

(e) The denotation of "witness" is important. It will not do to translate it as, "The Lord spoke well of the word..." The connotation is obviously positive, but the denotation remains sig-

nificant: God "witnessed to" his word by allowing miracles to be performed.

Since the passages are similar, one is tempted to translate the terms in a similar way in each. It may be that the reader is intended to think back to the Nazareth situation when reading the account of the preaching at Iconium and to reflect on the superiority of the witness which God gives to the word, over that given by man, even by the fellow citizens of Jesus himself. Here at Iconium Jesus through the apostles was doing the very thing of which he spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth: performing miracles<sup>8</sup> outside of Israel, in the diaspora and even amongst the gentiles. All this is lost, however, if one does not have the verbal clues provided by the repetition of the same vocabulary. This can only happen in a more or less literal translation.

**IV. What avenues of possible meaning are opened up by such a more literal translation? Let us examine each of the crucial terms and then see what the verse could mean in its context.**

(A) "Witnessing" properly means perceiving the facts of a situation and speaking truthfully about it afterwards. Whilst in modern English one could witness a road accident without ever speaking about it in court afterwards, I have not been able to find in the New Testament any instance of "witnessing" without actually speaking. Perhaps "testify" would be a better translation. This excludes, I think, J.B. Phillips' rendering, "Everybody noticed what he said". It is more than this. They actually said something. What did they actually say? The text tells us that they said, "Is not this Joseph's son!"

This would imply that they witnessed to his identity. This does not seem to be very significant, however. The text also says that they were amazed at the words of grace that he spoke. Probably this involved them speaking to one another. The term "witness" inherently emphasizes not so much the purpose of the speaker as the result of the speech. It is testimony to the truth that matters. What is this truth? In Lk. 4.22 it is the "words of grace".

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8. The early Church thought of their miracles as performed ultimately by the ascended Jesus, e.g. Acts 3.12-16, 4.9-10, 29-30.

(B) If we translate **logos tes charitos** literally as "words of grace", we are free to see it as referring to the content of his message, rather than to his eloquence. The message had been short, leaving little room for eloquence, but the content had been stupendous. **Charis** can mean either gracefulness (beauty, eloquence and so on) or graciousness (favour, acceptance). In the LXX it usually translates the Hebrew **chen**, which can mean either of these, but in the book of Proverbs it three times translates **ratson**, which means "acceptance". Especially notable is Prov. 12.2: "A good man obtains favour (Heb. **ratson**, Gk. **charis**) from the Lord." I shall argue that **charis** in Lk. 4.22 ties in with "year of grace" or "acceptable year" in 4.19. Note the following.

(1) Cor. 6.1-2 suggests that Paul took **charis** as the equivalent of the Hebrew **ratson**. These verses read, "We exhort you not to receive the grace of God in vain, for he says, In an acceptable time I heard thee and in a day of salvation I helped thee. Behold now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation." The grace of God seems to be connected with the acceptable time, which in the Hebrew of Isa. 49.8 he is quoting, is the time of **ratson**.

(2) In Lk. 4 Jesus read from Isa. 61.1-2a, but interpolated a phrase from Isa. 58:5: "to set at liberty those who are oppressed." In Isa. 61, a figure is speaking who has been anointed by the Lord, not only to proclaim deliverance to the oppressed in Israel, but actually to bring it about. In Isa. 58, Israel is told that a mere ritualistic fast is not enough to make them acceptable before God; they must also liberate and assist the oppressed in their midst. Is there any connection between these passages? Both are concerned with what is required to bring about the promised restoration of Israel, but there is another factor joining the two passages which is very relevant for our quest for a meaning Lk. 4.22. Both passages refer to a time of acceptance, **ratson**. In Isa. 58.5, he asks, "Will you call this (hypocritical) fast a day of acceptance for the Lord?" This "acceptable time" is the time when God will accept Israel. It is the Restoration which had been promised through the prophets after the punishment of Exile had been fulfilled. It is connected with the year of jubilee, a sort of super-jubilee at the end of time, when God would set Israel free, but when Israelites must also set one another free.

(3) On the lips of Jesus in the gospels, the term **charis** means simply "thanks". It does not refer to the grace of God to an individual or to Israel. What term then does he use for this con-



cept which is hardly absent from his teaching? The term is the "good pleasure" of God (**eudokia**), which is used in the LXX to translate **ratson**.

(C) We are now ready to say what the verse could mean when we take seriously the theologoumena which it contains, instead of dissipating them through a non-literal translation. The verse states that the Nazarenes were amazed at the message Jesus proclaimed of liberation for Israel (words of grace, acceptance). Whatever their misgivings about the well-known "son of Joseph" being the agent of the divine deliverance, the fact remains that Jesus had proclaimed this desirable deliverance and had claimed he was about to bring it in. They had heard it with their own ears and they had to acknowledge that it was indeed so.

### **Conclusion**

The literal translation is more likely to be open to all the possible meanings of the original. The Oxford tradition chooses one meaning and expresses this meaning with great clarity. It would never occur to the average reader to question the rendering, because it is so well expressed. Thus the reader becomes the prisoner of the translator. Instead of a priestly class interpreting scripture, we have a group of translators. It is significant that the meanings reflected in the modern translations of this verse have been propounded by commentators who used a more or less literal translation. The literal translation does not shut out the meaning expressed in any given non-literal version. Rather, it is ideally open to all the possible meanings of the original.

A literal translation can perform the function of creating and maintaining a "sacred language", which in turn forms the means whereby the literally translated sacred text can be understood. The language of the KJV once formed such a "sacred language" in the English-speaking world and the RV and ASV were able to "plug in", as it were, into this fund of fairly generally understood vocabulary to make their literal translations intelligible. I for one cannot be happy at the rapid disappearance of this factor from our culture. A generation is arising which is being cut off from its past. What can be done about this?

In the light of the foregoing I would urge the following. In the English-speaking world, the KJV and a related more literal translation should be preserved (e.g. ASV). Increasingly the KJV

has to be taught in universities to enable students to understand English literature. I feel, however, that these versions and the "sacred language" that goes with them will be lost for ever unless there are frequent occasions when they are exclusively used — e.g. in public church reading. When the KJV is well read, there is still nothing better-sounding. For French, I wonder if the TOB is going to become an "authorized version.» If so I wish it well. Certainly its literal, and therefore liberating rendering of Lk. 4.22 augurs well for its future.

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