Exegesis and Translation

by Jean Claude Margot

Dr. Margot, a Swiss scholar, is well known in United Bible Societies circles as the translator of Bonnes Nouvelles d'Aujourd'hui, *the French counterpart of the New Testament section of* Today's English Version (= Good News for Modern Man). *This paper was read at a meeting of the UBS European Translation Committee. We are indebted to Dr. Paul Ellingworth for drawing our attention to it and for translating it from French.*

THE subject of this article[1] is the place of exegesis in the translation of the Bible. In order to put this subject in focus, I shall begin by mentioning two opposite dangers into which translators are in danger of falling (and into which, as experience proves, they do in fact often fall). On the one hand, people tend to underestimate, or reduce practically to zero, the exegetical effort which is needed. They do this for various reasons. For example, in various parts of the world translators often do not have the necessary training to enable them to use sound exegetical methods or even good commentaries on the books of the Bible. Or they think that in order to understand the original text, it is enough for the translator to subscribe to an orthodox and rigid confession of faith. Unfortunate consequences follow from this: wrong translations, misunderstandings, harmonizations forced upon different texts, the introduction into a given passage of a Christian doctrine which does violence to the context, etc. On the other hand, and this is the converse danger, exegetical training may be given an exclusively privileged status. People think that a good exegete must *ipso facto* be a good translator. This is a point of view widely held among specialists in European faculties of theology.

I should like now to take up these two points in greater detail: first, by clarifying the position of the United Bible Societies (UBS) concerning the translator's exegetical training; and second, by propounding the thesis that a pure exegete is rarely a good translator.

I. BIBLE SOCIETIES AND EXEGESIS

There can now be no question that for UBS translation specialists, serious exegetical study of the source text is an indispensable condition for making a translation of high quality—though, of course,

[1] This article is a somwhat revised version of a paper presented in April 1975 to a meeting of the United Bible Societies' European Regional Translation Committee. The author wishes to thank the Rev. Paul Ellingworth for translating the article and for some useful suggestions.

other conditions must also be fulfilled. This fact must be emphasized in the light of the lack of information and the apparent prejudices which can be found in certain circles. In an article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Morton Smith stated not many years ago: "The Bible Societies are strongholds of pseudorthodoxy" (JBL, 1969/1, p. 23). This implied for the author that Bible Societies' staff were quite incapable of taking account of the results of biblical scholarship. To give another example, I have often heard remarks like the following about common language translations supported by the UBS: "for the Bible Societies, it doesn't matter what one translates as long as it is understandable", or: "in the choice between faithfulness and clarity, the Bible Societies have chosen clarity". But if Bible Societies are engaged in continual research towards a precise translation method, it is because we refuse to be enclosed in the traditional dilemma which contrasts faithfulness to the original text with clarity or literal, "precise" translation with "treacherous" elegance. This dilemma has been expressed in a famous formula which goes back to Renaissance times: "Translations are like women: if they are beautiful they are not faithful, and if they are faithful they are not beautiful". (We are naive enough to believe that there can be women who are both beautiful and faithful . . .) As Renato Poggioli has put it: "After all, in every artistic pursuit, beauty is the highest kind of fidelity and ugliness is only another name for disloyalty . . ." (in Brower, *On Translation*, Cambridge Mass., 1959, p. 143). The aim of UBS translation specialists is a translation which will be both faithful to the source text and in conformity with the structures of the receptor language. The UBS translation departments are therefore equally concerned to provide translators with both biblical and linguistic information.

The concern for biblical information can be supported by many examples, including an edition of the Greek New Testament for Translators with clearly presented textual information[2]; the preparation of a New Testament Greek dictionary, which will group words in semantic domains, not in alphabetical order, thereby helping translators to discover shades of meaning which distinguish words relating to the same area (material, spiritual, cultural, etc.); the preparation of a book intended to explain for translators the many textual difficulties of the Old Testament;[3] the activity of UBS translation consultants whose task is to help translation committees throughout the world and to check their work before it is sent to the press; the publication of articles in the journal *The Bible Translator*;

2 UBS Stuttgart, 1st ed. 1966, ed. Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Bruce M. Metzger and Alan Wikgren; 2nd ed. 1968, edited by the above and Carlo M. Martini; 3rd ed. 1975.

3 See report on the Greek New Testament Wordbook for Translators in *Technical Papers for the Bible Translator*, Vol. 24 No. 1, 1973 pp. 141-4.

translators' seminars and translation handbooks (those on Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, the letters of John and Ruth have already been published).

The translators' handbooks merit particular attention, since they are being published at an opportune time to fill a serious gap. All too often, the translator opens even an excellent standard commentary, only to find that the commentator's interests do not always coincide with his own and that the book remains silent about major translational questions such as the meaning of idioms and metaphors. In such commentaries, one also finds many statements which are open to question because they bear the mark of linguistic presuppostions which may mislead the insufficiently critical translator. For example, a recent commentary on the Psalms includes the following statement about the refrain of Ps. 136: "Everyone knows that the (Hebrew) word *ḥesed*, translated here by 'love', is a term which is completely untranslatable . . .". However, as Nida and Taber write, "in most instances the surrounding contest points out quite clearly which of (the) basic meanings of a word is intended" (*The Theory and Practice of Translation* [Leiden, 1969], p. 56). If Ps. 136 is considered as a whole, the translation of *ḥesed* by "love" or "goodness" is quite satisfactory. Another example is a debatable interpretation of the use of the article in Hebrew, found in a note on Exodus 2: 15 in a French translation of this book. The text refers to the well beside which Moses sits in the land of Midian. The note reads: "This well was perhaps traditionally known, since it is marked by the use of the definite article". (Michaëli's commentary on Exodus [Neuchâtel, 1974], takes the same line, not only in 2: 15 but also in 3: 2 about the burning bush. There are similar examples in other Old Testament commentaries.) However, Joüon's excellent *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (Rome, 1947) leads the specialist to distrust such deductions, which are based on the use of the definite article in such modern languages as French or English. In his paragraph on the article, Joüon writes: "the use of the article in Hebrew is rather fluid". He goes on to set up a distinction between perfect and imperfect determination, and he puts into the category of imperfect determination both the texts we have quoted from Exodus. (Joüon translates Exodus 2: 15 by "near a (certain) well" and 3: 2 by "a bush", p. 426.)

It is therefore indispensable to provide translators with special commentaries designed to meet the problems which the translator has to face and based on more up-to-date linguistic information. It should be added that more recent volumes in this series show an improvement over the handbooks on Mark (1961) and Luke (1971), by introducing more material on discourse analysis. As the introduction to the commentary on Acts (London, 1972) puts it: "In this Handbook the basic units for discussion are the paragraphs, or sets of closely related paragraphs. This is . . . in contrast with the Hand-

book of Mark, which followed the more traditional practice of discussing translation problems on the basis of verse divisions. However, an approach based essentially on verse or sentence units is too circumscribed and tends to neglect the crucial features of the overall discourse. Both for analyses of exegesis and for translation the larger units are the indispensable bases for discussion. Otherwise, one fails to see the forest because of the trees" (p. 6). Of course, these commentaries are not perfect; they too sometimes fail to mention a problem which the translator has to solve, but the authors themselves admit they do not claim to make the use of other commentaries superfluous.

To sum up, one may say that progress has still to be made in the area of cooperation between biblical scholars and linguists and that closer cooperation could be of mutual benefit. Much also remains to be done to make sure that translation committees throughout the world make effective use of the tools placed at their disposal. However, I think that the facts I have mentioned are enough to show that UBS specialists are far from being uninterested in exegesis.

II. THE EXEGETE AND TRANSLATION

Experience has often proved that a good exegete does not automatically make a good translator. This is so, firstly, because the exegete has such a detailed knowledge of the original text that he simply does not normally realize how difficult his translation may be for a reader who does not know Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic. As Fr. H. Cazelles, one of the translators of the *Bible de Jérusalem*, has written: "Of course, it is the translation itself which presents most of the problems. The translator is close to the original text, and since he lives with it, its imagery and expression appear easily intelligible to him, and as a result, he finds it hard to accept the criticisms of those who question literary matters . . ." (*The Bible Translator*, London, October 1958, pp. 154-155). Thus, there is often a gap between what the translator-exegete understands, and what is or is not understood by his intended readers. It can also happen that the exegete also deliberately excludes from consideration the search for good translation principles, reserving the right to give all necessary explanations in notes. For example, one of translators of the *Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible* said to me explicitly: "For me, the main thing is not the translation, but the notes". But it is important not to lose sight of, or rather to apply to this particular case, the definition by Vinay and Darbelnet of the main aim of translation: "Outside the school, the aim of translation is to communicate to others what has been said or written in a foreign language. The translator, therefore, translates not in order to understand, but to help others understand. He has himself understood before he translates" (*Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais* [Paris and Monteal, 1958], p. 24).

It is true, as Vinay and Darbelnet's reference to "the school" shows, that there are exceptions to this rule. A teacher may require a pupil learning a foreign language to make a word for word translation, in order to check whether he has fully grasped the meaning and structure of the original text. It has also been noticed that translators of the Bible who used as their only basis a common language translation, such as *Today's English Version*, tend to translate it literally into their language rather than using that language's natural resources. It is therefore good to provide them with two basic translations, one in common language, to give them a better understanding of the general meaning, and a more literal translation, to force them to choose the most suitable solution in their own language. It sometimes happens that a Hebrew idiom has the same meaning in other languages, whereas it would be completely meaningless if translated literally into English or French. Apart from such cases, it should be clear that the function of translation is to transmit a message from a foreign language into the mother tongue of a particular group of readers who do not know the foreign language in question. It is therefore important not to betray, by using a bad translation method, the thorough exegesis with which one has begun. Two consequences follow:

(*a*) In addition to his exegetical effort, that is, the effort to understand the original text in its wider (literary, historical, geographical, cultural etc.) context, the translator must also make a careful study of the milieu in which the translation is intended to be used. This study will also be both linguistic and cultural. He must bear constantly in mind the question asked by E. Cary in his book *La Traduction dans le monde moderne* (Geneva, 1956): not only "What are you translating?", but also "Where and when are you translating?" "For whom are you translating?" (pp. 25-33). It is because these principles have been ignored that a large number of errors and absurdities have found and still find their way into various translations of the Bible. Such mistakes may lead to serious misunderstandings of the Christian faith.

(*b*) The twofold process (understanding the original text and the milieu in which the translation will be used) calls for the work of a team in which the various members will be competent in different areas.

However, there is another problem. The exegete's difficulty in putting himself into the skin of the potential reader goes only half way towards explaining the unsatisfactory character of many Bible translations. Another difficulty is what a poet called "the holy fear of changing, however little, the syntax of the Holy Spirit". Some people are convinced, more or less consciously, that the biblical languages are sacred and that their form should therefore be repro-

duced in translation. This point of view is well illustrated in the preface to Darby's French New Testament (Vevey, 1859). More recently, D. Marguerat, in an article on new translations of the New Testament describes the scruple of translator-exegetes as follows: "Until [recent times] exegetes were exclusively preoccupied with the most precise correspondence between the text as interpreted by exegesis and the receptor language. This places translation under a requirement of formal correspondence between the original and the translated texts. Modifications necessary to make the text readable are considered as a second best or an inevitable concession" (*Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, Lausanne 1972/II, p. 105.)

In comments made to me about the French common language translation of the New Testament,[4] it is rather surprising to note a certain convergence between the reactions of exegetes who take up a very critical position with regard to the text, and some of the strictest conservative evangelicals! These reactions are related to a still widespread opinion in our churches that the more a translation is literal, the more it is faithful. We are sometimes told: "the French common language translation is useful for people who know nothing about the gospel and who need to be convinced, but when they have advanced a little in the faith, they can read the Segond." In many countries, various groups have worked out a doctrinal defence of the "language of Canaan" and of so-called concordant translations, in which a given word of the original must always be translated by the same word in the receptor language.[5] On this matter I would make two comments:

(*a*) First a theological comment. The idea that the biblical languages have a sacred character contradicts the theme of the incarnation. In order to speak to men, God uses men and languages understood by men at the various periods represented by the biblical documents (Hebrew, Aramaic, then Greek in the 1st century of our era). To quote Fr. Cazelles again: "Just as the discovery of Greek papyri has destroyed the idea of a 'biblical Greek' as an original sacred language, different from the *koinè*, ordinary post-classical Greek; similarly the discovery of the language of Canaan used in the Tell el-Amarna letters, the Ugaritic tablets of the 14th century B.C., and certain inscriptions has weakened the idea that the spelling and vocabulary of Hebrew make it a special sacred language . . .

4 *Bonnes Nouvelles Aujourd'hui: le Nouveau Testament en français couran* (United Bible Societies, 1971).

5 See for example Arie de Kuiper: "Aquila redivivus—idiolectics: a Dutch idiosyncrasy" in Robert G. Bratcher, John J. Kijne and William A. Smalley (eds.), *Understanding and Translating the Bible: Papers in Honor of Eugene A. Nida* (American Bible Society, 1974), pp. 80-85. cf. also in the same volume "L'impôt du temple: Matthieu 17: 24-27, problèmes d' exègése et de traduction," by the present author, pp. 101-121.

Resemblances [between Hebrew and cognate languages] are not limited to vocabulary, but extend to style, prosody and types of narrative: dialogues or repetitions . . . The biblical authors had as their first aim that of being understood and they used the linguistic tools at their disposal" (in *Les quatre fleuves* [Paris 1973/1], pp. 22-23).

As far as the later spread of the gospel is concerned, the story of the first Pentecost has a prophetic and exemplary character. Men who gathered in Jerusalem on that day heard the apostles speaking in their various languages about "the great things that God has done". So man is not called upon to learn a sacred language in order to know God; God draws near to him through his witnesses, to speak to him in the language he understands. The conception of a sacred language is proper to other religions, but foreign to Christianity.

(*b*) My second objection to the unique or sacred character of the biblical languages is of a linguistic nature. Linguistic analysis of biblical Greek and Hebrew shows they are languages like others, having their own qualities and shortcomings. Their use in the Bible is explained by historical reasons, not by the fact that they are more capable than other languages of transmitting divine messages. The exceptional value which has been attributed to certain features of biblical Hebrew, for example, is based on a misunderstanding of general linguistics. In fact, the same syntactic or grammatical features are found in other languages. In *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, J. Barr rightly denounces the methodological error of contrasting biblical Hebrew with classical Greek (and still more with a certain segment of classical Greek), without reference to the data of general linguistics. He gives many examples which are, or should be, well known. I have often noted deep-rooted prejudices, not only among the general public, but also among biblical scholars, concerning the biblical languages and languages in general. One hears people speak of "poor" and "rich" languages, "higher" and "lower" languages, "abstract" and "concrete" languages.

For example, the draft introduction of a recent translation of the Old Testament read: "Hebrew makes wider use of *concrete* words which call up a picture, rather than abstract words This is particularly true of words having a theological usage. For example, 'the Lord is patient' is literally 'the Lord has long nostrils'; 'the tenderness of God' is 'the bowels of God'."

In my comments on this draft introduction, I pointed out to the author the number of abstract terms in the Old Testament which have a theological content: grace, love, truth, faithfulness etc. I also asked him if, on the same principles, French would not seem to be a "concrete" language for a foreigner hearing expressions such

as "to have your stomach in your heels" (meaning "to be very hungry"), "to have your heart in your belly" ("to be brave"), "to have your heart on your hand" ("to be generous").

One cannot insist too much on the fact that all languages can respond to new situations and express, according to their particular genius, a message first expressed in another language. In other words, the biblical languages are never "untranslatable". J. L. Doneux, a Roman Catholic specialist in African languages, writes: "We have . . . perpetuated a fiction It is not language which says what it means, but the speaker. It is enough for the linguist to be convinced that every language can serve as an instrument for everything the speaker says and means in it . . . The Word of God can be translated into African languages, just as into any other language in the world. This is possible because language functions among all men on the basis of the same conditions of possibility, symbolic function and experience of reality Neither differences of grammar, nor variations in lexical stocks, nor cultural variations in the semantic organization of the datum underlying the terms, make translation impossible" (*Afrique et Parole* [Paris, 1969], pp. 47-48).

For these reasons, there is a strong danger that translations by professional exegetes will remain in particular grooves, as long as the exegetes do not have additional basic linguistic information.

III. CONCLUSION

It would be unreasonable to expect the translator to repeat the work of specialists on establishing a reliable basic text, and in providing precise information about the structure and meaning of that text. But the translator should be asked, on the one hand, to become aware of the kind of problems which arise, and on the other hand, to know how to consult specialized works which enable him to draw on the results and present state of research. He must also be helped to distinguish, among the products of this research, what is directly useful to his own work (this is also the aim of the translators' handbooks). Space forbids to enter in detail into the problem created by the structural analysis of texts, which is very popular at the present time in France I will confine myself to a few brief remarks.

According to François Bovon, "structural analysis is distinguished from traditional exegesis by the fact that it works in a different area. Exegesis, as normally practised by biblical scholars, is research into an author, his thought, the influences upon him and his genius. Structural analysis puts the historical author in backets, to concentrate his attention on the text alone, understood as a constructed whole whose functioning is to be understood" (*Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique* [Neuchâtel, 1971], p. 20). At first, the method of structural analysis (to be carefully distinguished from structural

ideology) seems to benefit the translator. He is indeed called upon to translate the text in its present state, and not the various strata which may be distinguished by historical-critical exegesis (Pentateuchal or synoptic sources, *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, Aramaic substratum of the gospels, for example). It is also good for the translator to stand some way back from the details of the text, in order to consider their functioning and general structure. The trees must not prevent one from seeing the forest; little twigs must not prevent one from seeing the tree.

However, I have two important reservations, one pedagogical, the other linguistic. From the pedagogical point of view, the method is difficult to teach to the average translator. Many articles on this subject are hard to follow. We are in an exploratory phase and clear principles, easy to apply, have not yet emerged. A translator who has only half digested details picked up here and there is in danger of proceeding arbitrarily or else of losing himself in the distinction between various levels (functions, actors, narration, for example). In studying certain essays one often has the impression that the author follows very complicated ways of reaching results which are already known through more traditional methods. For example, after a complex analysis of Acts 10:1-11: 18, the conclusion is reached that the gospel is intended also for the heathen! One is therefore justified in at least waiting for a certain stabilization of research before recommending this method unreservedly.

From the linguistic point of view, it is regrettable that exegetes who enter the area of structural analysis have so narrow a linguistic training. The names most often quoted are those of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Greimas (inspired by Propp) and Barthes. But these exegetes do not give the impression of being in touch with international developments in linguistics. But if exegesis wishes to use the contribution of linguistics, as indeed it urgently needs to do, it would be wise to widen its sources of information. As one who owes a great deal to my linguist colleagues in the UBS, I can only regret seeing a movement with linguistic pretensions based on such a narrow foundation. But it is possible that this state of affairs will be modified in the future when we have gone beyond the stage of "fashion and snobbery . . . the third misfortune of linguistics in France" to quote G. Mounin (*Clefs pour la linguistique* [Paris, 1971], p. 8).

In any case it is important not to base everything on a single discipline. In the area of our present concern, it is important to develop co-operation between the specialists in disciplines which have become traditional and specialists in new methods which are being explored. As P. Ricoeur puts it: "Co-operation between resear-

chers can provide data which a single researcher cannot assume. The cross-fertilization of methods is not the problem of one man, but maybe the problem of a group. There is an *ecclesia* (community) of research" (*Exégèse et herméneutique* [Paris, 1971], p. 287).

This is what we try to do in the UBS, by providing opportunities for the exchange of views and information between biblical scholars, linguists and, of course, translators.

Aubonne, Switzerland