

Views from the Pews: A Translator's View on finding the right words

I've been privileged to be part of a small team which has been working towards a new translation of the Bible into Māori. Apart from the specific issues arising from the project, being involved in this work has made me realise that we are very much at the mercy of translators and their decisions about how to handle the Biblical texts.

Two examples: in Psalm 100, the old prayer book has the verse, 'It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves', which agrees with both the oldest Greek versions (2nd century BC) and Jerome's Latin version (5th century AD). However, more modern English versions say, 'It is he that made us, and we are his.' Can both be right? The cause of this difference is the existence of two Hebrew words which are pronounced the same (lō), but spelt differently, meaning respectively 'not', and 'his'. 'Not' is in fact the actual form in the Hebrew original of this psalm, but recent scholarship has decided that 'his' is what was intended.

In Matthew 15, we find the story of Jesus' meeting with the Canaanite woman whose daughter is ill. She approaches Jesus, and the disciples say to him, 'Ἀπόλυσον her, because she keeps shouting after us.' Jesus replies, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.' What do the disciples say to Jesus, what is 'ἀπόλυσον'? Most translations have, 'Send her away!' But the Jerusalem Bible has, 'Give her what she wants.' Again, quite different meanings. In fact, the Greek word which occurs here can mean 'send away', but often it has the additional nuance of liberation or granting of wishes. It's used of Pilate's 'releasing' Barabbas (Matt 27.15), and of the master 'releasing at his request' the slave who owed him an enormous amount of money (Matt 18.27). It seems to me that this interpretation actually makes better sense of the whole conversation. The disciples ask Jesus to grant the woman's wish, but he answers that he's come only for Israelites, not pagans, but of course goes on to grant her wish in the end.

These are two examples where such differences of interpretation don't actually matter greatly. However, there are other cases, a bit more subtle in their way, which have had considerable consequences for the history of the church.
(to be continued)

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