BIBLE TRANSLATION AND CULTURE

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Category: Observations

Mark Naylor has just posted a superb article which looks at the way in which culture has an impact on Bible translation.

> *The English Standard Version (ESV), according to the preface on its website, â€œis an â€˜essentially literalâ€™ translationâ€ that emphasizes â€œword-for-wordâ€ correspondence, in order to â€œbe transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.â€ However, unfortunately for literal translations, there is an inverse relationship between maintaining the structure of the original text with â€œword-for-wordâ€ correspondence and the communication of meaning. To the extent that a translation maintains original structure and words, it fails to provide the meaning.Â Therefore, to claim direct access to both structure and meaning is oxymoronic. It is only by using the target language structure and words (i.e., the language of the reader) that communication is achieved.*
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> *Like rote learning, repetition of the words does not guarantee comprehension.Â It is only by â€œputting it into your own (cultureâ€™s) wordsâ€ that meaning is ensured.Â In the Sindh, many young boys go to school in madrassas where they memorize the Quran in word perfect Arabic.Â Such a stress on the purity of the original text, while impressive, fails to result in comprehension, for they do not speak Arabic.*

Naylor goes on to illustrate this principle for the Bible by using examples from the book of Ruth.

> *As an example, the Old Testament cannot be translated without a clear understanding of the ancient patriarchal assumptions of Hebrew society. If the translation is into a language with different cultural assumptions, such as the egalitarian orientation in Canadian society, miscommunication can easily occur. In Naomiâ€™s case above, the average Canadian will sympathize with Naomiâ€™s loss of husband and sons, but will not comprehend the implications of that loss and therefore miss a crucial point of the story.Â The English translation of the book of Ruth necessarily uses words and concepts that, for the Canadian reader, derive their meaning from our egalitarian context and will be read that way.Â But Naomi is not a woman with an individual identity who has suffered a great loss.Â She is a woman who has lost her identity and purpose, because in a patriarchal system these aspects of a womanâ€™s being are dependent upon her relationship with a man â€“ father, husband or son.Â Without this basic understanding a key redemptive phrase of the book cannot be properly understood: â€œBlessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer todayâ€ (ESV), clarified in the TEV as â€œPraise the Lord! He has given you a grandson today to take care of you.â€ Â Through the blessing of a male heir, Naomi has received a "redemption" that has meaning within the patriarchal context: her identity has been restored.*

I remember when translating Ruth into Kouya, we were concerned about how we would translate the term 'kinsman redeemer' only to find that it was really easy because the Kouya have a more or less identical concept. In this case, culture made translation easier than it might have been, but it is not always the case.

You can see other references to Mark Naylor's work here, here and here.