ARE SOME LANGUAGES IMPURE?

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Category: Bible Translation

This is a short article written by my colleague Alan Gibson. I thought it was worthy of a wider readership, so I asked his permission to republish it here. I hope you enjoy it.

'I will purify each language and make those languages acceptable for praising me. Then, with hearts united, everyone will serve only me, the LORD.' .

The clear implication of this CEV translation is that there are some languages which are not in themselves acceptable to God for praising him and need to be â€˜purifiedâ€™. But no one I know engaged in the translation of the Bible into the remaining minority languages of the world would accept that proposition! Nor am I aware of any other version that takes it that way.

The Hebrew noun used here for â€˜languageâ€™ is SAPHAH which has a basic meaning of 'lip'. It is translated as such in the KJV 112 times, over against 6 x as 'speech' and 7 x as 'language'. Other English translations of the Zephaniah text are interesting, with the KJV having 'language' , the NIV and NASV using 'lips' and the ESV with 'speech'. SAPHAH is, however, the noun used in the Babel story in Genesis 11 where no one seriously questions that distinct languages are involved!

It is basic exegesis, when etymology doesnâ€™t answer our translation questions, to compare Scripture with Scripture and look at the theological issues. Elsewhere the Bible clearly shows us that it is not our language but our hearts which need to be purified if we are to praise God. In Isaiah 6, for example about, the prophet describes himself as a man of 'unclean lips'. Symbolically his lips are then made clean by the coals from the altar. Clearly a moral meaning is intended there and David uses similar language in Psalm 51:10 & 15. Is that what the Lord is saying here in Zephaniah 3? I believe it is. The purification being spoken of is almost certainly a moral one, and not a purification of language as such. It is significant that the CEV adds the moral sense in its footnote: 'I will change the hearts of all people and make them fit for praising me'.

What can we learn from this little exercise? Is this another a warning against allowing easy English to be preferred to accuracy in our Bible teaching here in the UK? But surely there is also a lesson here about prayer. When all the hard work has been done to provide Scripture in a new language as a source for people to praise God something else is needed. The speakers must be changed so that they will want to do so. We need to be praying that they will call upon the name of Jesus to purify their hearts and, as the CEV footnote says, â€˜make them fit for praising himâ€™.