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JACOB OR ANGELS?

It is not unusual for some people to study the Bible using several different translations. They do this to get a broader insight into what the scriptures teach. A variety of translations can prove interesting because of the differences in opinion of the translator, which may be reduced when the translation is by committee. Translations also differ because of the variation in methods of translation, ranging from formal equivalence to dynamic equivalence. The formal equivalence method gives, as nearly as possible, a word-for-word direct translation from the original languages. The more formal the equivalence, the more difficult the translation is to read in English. Also, some idioms may be difficult to translate. Dynamic equivalence may not even be considered a translation at all, but rather a paraphrase or commentary, in its most extreme form. The translator using this method wants to convey the ideas expressed, perhaps in the way that the original readers would have understood. These versions are prone to express the editor's biases. Nevertheless, using several translations throughout the gamut of styles may lead to new insights.

One interesting example of this may be found in Deuteronomy 32:8-9. The common translation goes something like:

When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. For the LORD'S portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance.

This is pretty straightforward, if somewhat confusing. Does this mean that God divided the nations of the world into twelve basic groups or territories? And did he do this just because Jacob had twelve sons? Or does "the number of the children of Israel" mean the total population of the Hebrew people that ever existed and will exist on the earth? That would mean each boundary would be rather small.

There is, however, another translation. It is much more obscure, and raises different questions.

When the Most High assigned lands to the nations, when he divided up the human race, he established the boundaries of the peoples according to the

number of angelic beings [or sons of God]. And the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob is the bond of his inheritance in Israel.

Rather than setting the bounds of the nations based on Jacob's descendants (which did not exist until many years after Adam), this version (the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew) says he based them on the number of angels, and that Jacob's inheritance was limited to "Israel," commonly thought to comprise the Land of Promise. Is there any other scripture that would support the idea that the nations were assigned according to the number of angelic beings? Perhaps.

In Daniel 10, an angel comes to explain what Daniel had been praying to understand. He admits that it had taken a while to come. That was because the "prince" of Persia had withstood him. He later speaks about the "prince" of Greece. That these princes were angelic (or demonic) beings becomes even more obvious when he speaks of "Michael your prince." The word translated prince may also be rendered as keeper. This would seem to indicate that each nation was kept by a particular angelic being, in keeping with the one version of the Deuteronomy passage. This may even be enhanced by the words of Jesus. Of the little children, he says "in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven." (Matt 18:10) This is sometimes interpreted that each individual person has a guardian angel, but it could also refer to the angels of the nations to which the little ones belonged.

This is not to say that the Septuagint/Dead Sea Scrolls version is better or more accurate, even though there may be more textual support for it in Daniel. It is merely to show that the use of multiple translations may produce interesting—though not necessarily clearer—results.

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A NEW PETER

Should preachers carry guns in the pulpit? Should the United States allow Syrian refugees into the country when some small fraction of them might be Islamic radicals? For that matter, should Christians in America drive to the church building when there is an off chance of a drunk or mad driver on the highway? It seems that fear seems to be driving our decisions and emotions these days. Perhaps that question about the drivers is over the top; but the first two are fueled by fear of those who might target Christians. Should we let such fears affect our faith?

This was a very real question in the first couple of centuries of the existence of the church. Until 325 A.D., the church was not even recognized as a legal entity by the Roman government. While most of those three centuries saw little persecution of the church, occasionally it was dangerous to be a Christian. Sometimes Christians were targeted for specific persecution. Nero famously lit the streets with bodies of Christians used as living torches. He even blamed the destruction of Rome by fire upon the Christians. Other emperors subjected Christians to combat in the arenas for entertainment. Eusebius lists many types of torture used to try to get Christians to renounce their faith, such as suspending them over a fire made with green wood so they would die of smoke inhalation. Nor has such

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persecution been limited to Rome. It is even around in some parts of the world today. Christians in America, though, sit in their expensive air-conditioned buildings on padded seats, and worry about the random possibility that they might be targeted.

Christians in Roman times could have found it easy to complain that the government was corrupt and irreligious. They more than we could argue that the head of government was doing all he could to suppress Christianity, that he was not a Christian and so they had the right to speak against the powers that be.

Those in the first two centuries might laugh at our fears. If not, they would probably wonder at how great these fears are. After all, in any given year the number of congregations targeted by shooters, bombers, or terrorists is about the same as a shark attack in Arkansas. It is a theoretical possibility, but little more. Even if it were significant, should not our attitude be that of the early Christians. Peter, who personally faced persecution, might have something to say to us.

Peter's first letter seems to have been written to address just these concerns that faced Christians in Roman times, and some complain face Christians in America today. Apparently some in his day had the same attitudes as many extremist Christians today. Peter's argument, though, is that the Christian is to accept the torture, misuse, and governmental opposition.

Honor the emperor

The emperor was not (until 325 A.D.) a Christian. Many of the emperors, as previously noted, actively opposed Christianity. These attitudes, naturally, flowed down even to the local governments. Peter had seen firsthand what the Roman government could do; they had executed his best friend on a stake for no good reason except to appease the Jewish leadership. In spite of that, he wrote:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. (1 Pet 2:13-17)

What was the obligation to the emperor? First he says it is obedience, because in obeying they would silence those who would malign them. More than this, though, Peter says to honor the emperor. This is not mere obedience, or even lip-service. Another translation is to value the emperor.

At a time when it is increasingly common to call presidents just by their last name, particularly in a derogatory manner, Christians should give him the honor of his proper title. When others belittle the office, question the president's loyalty, and call for his impeachment (without an impeachable offence), Christians should keep silent if they cannot say something good.

Persecution

Sometimes the call for arming the members of a congregation (including the preacher) or for the exclusion of a certain class of people stems from the awareness of the possibility of persecution. Churches have been targets of violence based on their beliefs. For possibly the first time in history, many terror attacks are religiously, rather than economically, based. The modern crusades and jihad are unlike their historical counterparts that were mainly

about conquest of lands and resources. Hence many Christians today advocate fighting fire with fire. That was probably the attitude of one of Peter's fellow apostles, who even shared his given name, Simon the Zealot.

Peter may at one time have shared the other Simon's Zionist sympathies, but by the time he wrote his letters, he had a different idea. It seems he had learned that God meant it when he said "vengeance is mine; I will repay." (Deut 32:35) When it comes to the persecuted church, Peter now thinks it is better to bear up under it.

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust. (1 Pet 3:15-18)

We have an example of one who suffered unjustly, but for a cause. If Jesus could die for our sins, how much more should we live for, and like, him?

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. (1 Pet 4:12-16)

The one who bombs an abortion clinic is not glorifying God, but bringing discredit on his name. The one who has an option to quit a job, but would rather take God's place at judge does not glorify God. The ones who refuse to show compassion because there might be one ISIS terrorist in a group of refugees are not only driving others away from Christ, but are being disobedient in themselves. Would it not be better to cause God's name to be glorified even as you are suffering rather than trying to explain to God why you chose to turn him (in the guise of the needy or the sinner) away?

Fear

Perhaps the increase in what appears to some to be hatred today stems from basic fear. The gun in the pulpit is for fear of someone coming in and shooting up the congregation. The opposition to refugees entering the country is the fear that some of them might be terrorists. (This ignores that terrorists are going to find other ways

into the country if they wish, or—more likely—they will use homegrown fighters.) A few years ago, some churches turned away some individuals out of a fear of AIDS. Peter even addresses the fears in the church, of his time or today.

The threat of someone coming in and taking away members of the congregation was very real at times in the first centuries of the church. Even without that threat, sometimes there was the very real threat of starvation, when those that did not have the right certification could not buy or sell. Since Christians would not swear that the emperor was God, they did not have the right certificate. In spite of very real threats, Peter says not to fear.

For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil. And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness'

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sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled. (1 Pet 3:12-14)

Peter apparently had been listening when Jesus said, "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matt 10:28) Fear of what others can do to you is deep-rooted in all of us. Fear, however, is indicative of a lack of trust in God. If God wishes the church to live and thrive, what can man do? This is not pure fatalism. Bad people do bad things in spite of the will of God. But what is the worst they can do? Kill you? Is that not rather the best thing they can do, because then you will have left this life in prospect of heaven? Fear of gunmen, bombs, or terrorists may be very strong. For most Christians, though, it is really remote. Our more common fears are of ridicule or rejection. Yes, a random ISIS terrorist may be hiding among Syrian refugees, but should we let that fear overtake our compassion for the homeless? Is the fear of someone shooting up the congregation based on reason, when very few instances of that happening have occurred?

Peter had been impulsive, even to the point of striking a man with his sword in defense of Jesus. It is possible that he only got the man's ear because Malchus ducked the blow that should have split his head. This same Peter, in the body, was not the same man who wrote the letters we have recorded from him. That Peter would, and did, suffer death rather than to bring discredit on God and Jesus. It is very clear which side of the debates he is on.

NO FUTURE IN STANDUP

The other day the preacher asked what wouldn't be in heaven. Somebody said football, which was not a popular answer with our Denver Broncos-loving preacher. However, the answer was right. There cannot be professional football as we know it in heaven. First of all, some teams would be hard pressed to find their players in heaven, since they are on probation for a variety of crimes. More importantly, football requires a clock, and there is no time in heaven. No clock; no two-minute warning. And everyone knows that the only important part of football is the last two minutes.

But for the same reason there could not be basketball or the other futbol, which Americans call soccer. Tennis and baseball don't revolve around clocks, so they might be there. And cricket. But speaking of eternity, have you ever watched a cricket match? It is the closest thing to eternity, and maybe the farthest thing from heaven, here on earth.

I learned to bowl cricket in Perth, Australia. Met some great Christians there. But Australia is not known for its Christians. Instead, I went to a bank to exchange American money for Australian. I handed the teller a \$20, a \$5, and five \$1s. He looked at them, then looked up and asked, "How do you Yanks do it?" I asked what he was talking about. He pointed out that all our bills were green, unlike most world currencies where each denomination is a different color. He said, "When you're drunk, how do you know which bill is which?" Says something about the Australian mentality. (And I had to admit that some drunks can't tell which is which.)

In a lot of places alcohol is not the big problem. In most "sailor towns" the big sin is adultery. In one port I had my bodyguard, whose main job was to tell the women that I already had a steady girlfriend. OK, maybe it was a

half-truth. He didn't tell them that my girlfriend was my wife back home. Maybe some of the Corinthian believers could have used him to help them.

Corinth had more problems than adultery, though. Tolstoy said, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Well, Corinth was certainly unhappy in its own way. Incest, court battles, family feuds, women's lib, divorce. The stuff soap operas are made of; and those don't even touch the real churchy issues.

Churches. I'm surprised someone hasn't made a soap opera based on churches rather than hospitals. That's where the real politics and in-fighting are today. I even heard of a church that split because one group wanted to paint the walls pea green, and the other group had some sense. Rare is the church split based on something that can be answered by the scriptures.

And the scriptures. Translating the scriptures can be as difficult as running a church. Do we use the word "immersion" or keep with the old standby, "baptism?" What is a gender-neutral term for father? How can we translate a verse that shoots holes in our favorite doctrine in such a way that it really supports it? When it comes to modern translations, it's all Greek to me.

Some things don't need translation, however. Music is universal; laughter is universal; and love is universal. (So is a studio in Hollywood, but that's a different story.) But getting back to the problem with football in heaven, how can there be music as we know it? Music is also based on time. But there is music in heaven. Maybe we baseball fans will have a little competition there. If they can figure out how to sing in heaven, then surely God can establish the ground rules so that the Redskins can beat the Cowboys throughout eternity. After all, if anybody can throw a perfect spiral, it must be God.

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