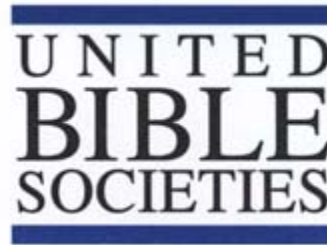


A World
Fellowship
of Bible Societies



BACKGROUND PAPER

SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION AND THE CHURCHES

1. Introduction: Bible Societies and the Bible

The Bible is the Book that has been the focus of the Bible Society Movement throughout the 200 years of its history. Underpinning the mission of providing the Bible to those who need it in a translation that they understand is the recognition that the Bible is the common foundation of all Christian churches. The Bible is the Book whose authority all Christian churches recognize, the Book in which they find unity in a common faith.

George Brown in *The History of the British and Foreign Bible Society Movement* (London: Bagster and Sons) wrote in 1859 about “The establishment of a Society for the universal diffusion of the Holy Scriptures,” and explained that “The Society is founded on the principle of reverence for the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as containing a revelation from God to man.” He further stated that “the Society aims to make these Holy Writings known, in every nation and in every tongue and, as far as may be, to render them the actual possession of every individual on the face of the whole earth” (p. 3).

In 1946 the United Bible Societies was formally established as an organization that united the national Bible Societies in a single structure that shared a common task. In his book *Taking the Word to the World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996) Edwin H. Robertson described the Bible Society movement as follows(p. 139):

The whole Bible Society work, national and international, depended upon the Bible. In one form or another, the Bible was accepted by all the churches of the world as authoritative, uniquely so. There were many different theories of inspiration, but these were not the concern of the Bible Societies. The heart of the matter was to circulate Bibles in a form that truly

represented the original Scriptures, accurately translated into languages which were accessible.

2. UBS Translation Principles

The early UBS approach to translation emphasized the transfer of meaning.¹ It was first called Dynamic Equivalence Translation and then Functional Equivalence. This approach has been adopted by many Bible Translation agencies and is sometimes referred to as “meaning-based translation.”² The focus is on the communication of the Good News.

Functional equivalence translation is contrasted with formal correspondence translation,³ which is also known as form-based or literal translation. Formal correspondence focuses on the translation of the message through as close a replication of the words and forms of the source text as possible. Faithfulness is judged on the basis of proximity of the form of the translation to the form of the original text.

At the UBS Council Meeting in 1980, Eugene Nida cited the importance of maintaining high standards in Scripture translation when he said, “The concern of the Bible Societies must be for meaningful, accurate, quality translations – three key words which summarize our goals” (*UBS Bulletin* 120/121:97). Although these principles are still upheld by the Bible Societies, they must be re-interpreted within the context of the Fellowship’s statements and commitments today in a fully interconfessional context⁴, as stated at the most recent World Assembly of the UBS in Midrand, South Africa, in October 2000. At this Assembly the UBS renewed its historical vision and mission in the words of its Purpose Statement as follows:

The world fellowship of national Bible Societies joins together, as the United Bible Societies (UBS), for consultation, mutual support and action in their common task of

achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures and of helping people interact with the Word of God.

The Bible Societies seek to carry out their task in partnership and cooperation with all Christian churches and with church-related organizations.

¹ *Toward a Science of Translating* by Eugene A. Nida. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964.

² *Meaning-based Translation: A Guide to Cross-language Equivalence* by Mildred L. Larson. Lanham: University Press of America, 1984.

³ *The Theory and Practice of Translation* by Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969.

⁴ See *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* edited by Timothy Wilt (St. Jerome: Manchester: 2002).

The Midrand emphasis on serving all the churches was not new. This policy had been stated many times before, but was now given the highest possible emphasis at the dawn of the new millennium. As part of the By-Laws of the UBS, this statement constitutes a powerful mandate for the UBS translation and publishing programme.

3. UBS Translation Types

The Midrand World Assembly in its Identity and Ethos Document affirmed that the UBS common task of “achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures” should be carried out –

- *in languages and media which meet the needs of people worldwide,*
- *in translations that are faithful to the Scripture texts in their original languages, and which communicate the biblical message,*
- *at prices people can afford.*

This formulation has been interpreted in line with the UBS policy of encouraging translation in the languages of people throughout the world, of producing translations based on the text in the biblical languages, of translating according to a theory that was identified first as dynamic equivalence and subsequently as functional equivalence, and in a level of language that is easily understood, that is, common language.⁵ The emphasis has been on the communication of the message.

However, Eugene Nida and his colleagues recognized that more than common language Bibles were needed and that functional equivalence was not adequate as a static translation theory. In 1974 the UBS Sub-Committee on Translation alerted the UBS Executive Committee (UBSEC) to the needs of churches for “a text for liturgical use.”

In 1992 UBSEC adopted a document entitled “What Should Bible Societies Publish?” setting forth “editorial guidelines” for the Bible Societies. This document speaks of “defined” audiences and lists different types of translations such as liturgical, literary and “bridge” translations as well as special translations for new readers, youth and others. And indeed the policy of having two translations is becoming increasingly prevalent in major languages that are used by an important church community. The liturgical Bible may be a revision of an

⁵ The expression “common language” has been adopted as a technical term referring to “that part of the total resources of a given language common to the usage of both educated and uneducated” (*Bible Translations for Popular Use* by William L. Wonderly. London: United Bible Societies, 1968. P. 3).

older church Bible or missionary translation, while the common language Bible is usually a new translation.

4. Canon and Canonicity

In the Christian Church the issue of canon and canonicity is a very old one. It is not surprising then that Bible Society discussion throughout the history of the movement has repeatedly focussed on the question of the canon and canonicity. It is important to note that especially since the founding of the United Bible Societies in 1946, the issue of “serving all the churches” has assumed ever increasing prominence. Frequent affirmations of the Bible Societies’ commitment to respond to the scriptural needs of all the churches have been made.

In an article entitled “The Bible Societies and the Deuterocanon as Scripture” David Burke, drew attention to the “pragmatic approach that was adopted by the Bible Societies and observed that “they have for the most part refused to take a doctrinal position on the canon, precisely so that they may be able to provide the churches in their regions with the Bible canon they need” (*Current Trends in Scripture Translation: UBS Bulletin* 182/183:236-237).

5. UBS – Roman Catholic Scripture Translation Work

Developments following Vatican II opened the way for closer cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and the UBS in the area of Scripture translation. Thus, following extensive discussions, the UBS and the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity signed a document in 1968, issued in a revised edition in 1987 as “Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible”. These principles have constituted the framework for interconfessional translation projects since that time.

6. UBS – Orthodox Scripture Translation Work

In 1993 UBSEC discussed “UBS Relations with the Orthodox Churches and Translation Projects” and adopted a resolution (93.27) which allowed for the use of the Church text as the base text for translations under specific circumstances.

There are currently a significant number of translation projects underway in the UBS Europe Middle East Region that include Orthodox participation. Of these, several projects are interconfessional with Roman Catholic involvement. In Ethiopia, in the Orthodox context, there are currently three projects in which there is Bible Society participation: a three-way interconfessional Protestant-Orthodox-Catholic Bible revision project in the Amharic language, a strictly Orthodox Bible translation project also in Amharic, and an Orthodox Ge’ez NT revision project.

Approaches to Scripture Translation

At the risk of oversimplifying, two philosophies of language may be highlighted in the discussion of translation and the churches' understanding and use of language. The first philosophy understands linguistic expression to be formulated primarily in propositional statements. The second philosophy seeks to interpret linguistic signs symbolically. The first approach to translation summarized below represents the first philosophy of language. The second approach represents the second philosophy.

One approach to translation is in terms of a message to be communicated. It looks broadly through the form for meaning. The emphasis is on equivalence; that is, the message of the original text is to be communicated in equivalent manner in the second language. This has been the primary UBS approach to translation. It has sometimes been characterised as being particularly appropriate for the spreading of the Good News, that is, for evangelisation.

A second approach to translation also looks for meaning and propositional statements, but it looks especially to the words and phrases that contain the meaning. The focus is on key words and expressions that may function more as symbols and icons than as conveyors of information.⁶ The emphasis for the translator is therefore on the retention as closely as possible of the key words, or forms, of the original text. This approach to translation is useful for Scripture translations that are intended to serve for Bible studies where word studies are important and for catechetical teaching and for liturgical use.⁷

7. Scripture Translation and the Churches

As the Bible Societies engage in Scripture translation, choices must be made and guidelines established in consultation and agreement with the churches to whom the translation belongs regarding the following:

1. *The source text: critical or church*
2. *The translation approach: common language, literary or liturgical*
3. *The translation category: confessional or interconfessional*

According to UBS policy, the best source text should be selected: the UBS Greek New Testament and the Masoretic text as published in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia for the Protocanon.⁸

⁶ "Icon of the Ineffable? An Orthodox View of Language and its Implications for Bible Translation" by Simon Crisp in *UBS Bulletin* 194/195:75-82.

⁷ See "*Liturgiam Authenticam*: On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publication of the Books of the Roman Liturgy." Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. 2001.

⁸ The BFBS officially adopted the 4th ed. of Nestle's text for its 1904 edition of the Greek New Testament text and recommended this text to its translators as their base text (Report by W.J. Bradnock on "The

When the church or churches being served by the translation use a traditional church text and require this to be translated, this is also acceptable.

For each translation project, translation principles and guidelines must be established. In seeking to establish guidelines that will be acceptable for establishing a working relationship between a national Bible Society and the local Orthodox Church, it is important that the interests of both parties are represented, those of the Bible Society that is supported by its members with the goal of serving the churches, and those of the Orthodox Church that wishes to establish a Scripture translation project.

A further issue relates to Church recognition of the translation. The identification of a project as a confessional translation (for example, Orthodox or Roman Catholic) is contingent on its being carried out under the aegis and official sanction of the Church. When the translation is initiated in cooperation with the highest official level of the Church, Church support may be claimed for the project. Recognition of a translation by the Roman Catholic Church is indicated by the *imprimatur* of the appropriate ecclesiastical authority. Recognition of a translation by an Orthodox Church is indicated by the appropriate statement by the highest official level of the Church.

It is important to distinguish between confessional and interconfessional translations and between confessional and interconfessional editions. The text may be interconfessional while the edition is confessional as has been the case in some recently published Bibles.⁹

8. Translation Priority and Resource Allocation

The Midrand Purpose Statement, does not establish priorities in the service of the churches. It simply declares the UBS commitment as a collective body to serve all the churches together.

Questions of priority and allocation of resources must be addressed in terms of the national Bible Societies and the churches which they serve. Needs must be established in the national context and the wishes of the supporting churches must be recognized. At the same time, each national Bible Society is a member of the global UBS Fellowship which has funding priorities defined by its governing bodies.

Translator's Translation" dated 28 April, 1971, p. 15). This is evidence of the Bible Societies' official departure from the Textus Receptus as base text for NT translations.

⁹ The French basic language version *Parole de Vie* is published in three editions that are identified as "Protestant", "Interconfessional" and "Catholic" according to the books that are included in each and their order of placement. The text in all three editions is the same interconfessional translation.



UBS GUIDELINES FOR SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION

A. Guidelines for Scripture Translation for General Audiences

In conformity with UBS policy, the best and most reliable original language base texts should be used. These should be scientific editions that meet the highest standards of scholarship. The base text for the Old Testament should be the Masoretic Text (MT) published by the German Bible Society as *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) or the forthcoming *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ). The base text for the New Testament should be the latest edition of the UBS Greek New Testament, published by the German Bible Society and the UBS, or the latest edition of Nestle-Aland.

B. Guidelines for Interconfessional Scripture Translation

In conformity with UBS policy, the best and most reliable original language base texts should be used. The base text for the Old Testament Protocanon should be the Masoretic Text (MT) published by the German Bible Society as *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) or the forthcoming *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ). For the deuterocanonical books the base text should be the Septuagint published by the German Bible Society in the edition of Alfred Rahlfs, with other critical texts being consulted as appropriate. The base text for the New Testament should be the latest edition of the UBS Greek New Testament, published by the German Bible Society and the UBS, or the latest edition of Nestle-Aland. In interconfessional translation projects in which Protestants and Catholics are collaborating, *The Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible* (revised edition of 1987) will apply. These guidelines should also be applied by common agreement for other projects such as Protestant – Roman Catholic – Orthodox translations, or Roman Catholic – Orthodox translations.

C. Guidelines for Confessional Scripture Translation

1. Base Texts

In conformity with UBS policy, the best and most reliable base texts should be used. The UBS recommends that an edition which is acceptable to the Church and which meets the highest standards of scholarship should be used. Identification of an appropriate edition will need to be determined for each project.

a. Old Testament

The UBS recommends that the Masoretic text or the Septuagint should be used as base text. In particular circumstances where churches have their own long-standing tradition of using a daughter translation this may be followed. In these cases however the UBS recommends that significant differences from the parent text should be indicated in the edition according to principles established for the project.

b. New Testament

The UBS recommends that the UBS/Nestle-Aland text should be used as base text. In particular circumstances where churches have their own long-standing tradition of using the Byzantine text this may be followed. In these cases however the UBS recommends that significant differences from the UBS/Nestle-Aland text should be indicated in the edition according to principles established for the project.

2. Canon and Order of Books

The scope of the canon of the Church for whom the translation is intended should be respected as well as its canonical order of books. In cases where a confessional translation is published in an interconfessional edition, it is recommended that the deuterocanonical texts be grouped together in a separate section preceding the New Testament.

3. Exegesis and Exegetical Helps

The translation should be based on sound scholarly exegesis. The UBS recommends that the UBS Handbooks and Helps for Translators together with other scholarly works should be used as reference materials. Guidelines for the use of sources that reflect traditional Church interpretation should be established for each translation project.

4. Types of Translation

Where possible and appropriate there should be at least two versions, a liturgical text and a common language translation. The liturgical text should respond to the requirements of church liturgy and of theological discourse within the context of church tradition. This may be a traditional text, a revision of an older church translation, or a new translation, depending on the requirements of the Church. It may be published as a lectionary for lectionary readings or as a complete Bible. The common language translation should be based on the principles of translation as communication of message. It should be in the style of language that is common and contemporary. It will normally be a new translation and should be a complete New Testament or Bible, depending on the requirements of the Church.

5. Helps for Readers

The traditional requirements of the church and the needs of the readers should be met through appropriate readers' helps. These may include introductions to the Bible, the two Testaments, groupings of books, individual books and even sections of books. These introductions must be clearly identified as being separate from the biblical text. The helps may also include section headings, parallel and cross references, and footnotes, together with supplementary materials like glossaries, indexes, concordances, maps, tables, calendar, illustrations, etc. Appropriate helps to be included in each edition should be identified and principles to be applied in their preparation should be agreed upon at the beginning of the translation project. This includes establishing guidelines for the nature and content of introductory material and footnotes in confessional editions.

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