

The New isiZulu Bible

The students at the U B I at Sweetwaters once complained to the teachers that they found the isiZulu Bible very difficult to understand. The teachers told them to pray for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to make the meaning clear to them. However, even though they prayed seriously, that Bible remained obscure to them. Why? Because many passages in it conveyed either no meaning or the wrong meaning. It is a testimony to the divine power of the Holy Spirit that many people still came to faith by hearing or reading this Bible, even though it was so poorly translated.

After we had worked on the new translation for a few days, our fellow translator, Queen, was very excited to see that now she could understand every verse in it. I remember her words: “I was so worried, because the Zulu people have to carry this Bible which does not say a thing.”

Why can people not understand the old Bible?

The Zulu translation published in 1959, a mere fifty years ago, still reflects nothing of a scientific approach to translation. People then still thought that a *faithful* translation had to be a *literal* translation. The translation had to reflect the idiom and even the sentence structure of the original. They did not realise that literal translation distorts the meaning of the text.

Let me mention a few examples from isiZulu translating onto English.

If an interpreter translates the isiZulu idiom “*Washaya utshani*” into English, and he says, “He hit the grass” instead of “He disappeared”, we all will know that that interpreter knows very little isiZulu. It will have the same effect if he translates “*Uzishaya oblakaniphile*” with “He beats himself a wise man,” instead of with, “You regard me as a fool”, or “*Ngishaya icilongo*” with “I beat the bugle”, or “*Ushaya imbodlongo*” with “He beats the bass” instead of “He sings bass”, *Isikhatshi sesidlive yinja*” with, “The time has been eaten by a dog.” The words may be right according to the dictionary, but the translation is wrong. It is a poor and unacceptable translation.

Yet that is how the Bible has been translated for 1900 years! Listen to this example from Genesis 5:24.

1959: UEnokhe wayebamba noNkulunkulu; kepha wayesengasekho nje, ngokuba uNkulunkulu wamthabatha.

This is a wrong translation, because it carried over the Hebrew idiom into isiZulu, where it has a totally different meaning. (Tell the story of the little Dutch girl) What it really means, is expressed by the new translation.

2011: U-Enokhi esaphila wayenobudlelwane noNkulunkulu. Akazange afe, wanyamalala, ngokuba uNkulunkulu wamthabatha.

A basic principle of translation

This last example is a good illustration of an important translation principle, which we can formulate as follows:

A LITERAL TRANSLATION OBSCURES OR DISTORTS THE MEANING OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT.

We can also express it in another way:

In order to render the meaning faithfully, the idiom, vocabulary, word order and grammar of the original usually needs to be changed in the receptor language.

“Covering one’s feet”

There are some interesting other examples of this principle. In Judges 3:24 and 1 Samuel 24:3 we encounter a Hebrew idiom, “to cover one’s feet”. Saul went into a cave “to cover his feet”, according to the KJV (Zulu 1959: *uSawulu wangena khona ukuba embese izinyawo zakhe*). As a child I used to think that meant he was taking a nap. However, the expression is actually an euphemism for “answering a call of nature”. (In most languages all over the world there are euphemisms for describing those bodily functions, as well as for one’s private parts, for sexual intercourse, dying and for getting or being intoxicated). Idiomatic isiZulu would say, “*USawulu wangena khona ukuba azikbulule.*”

This is the reason why the Bible Societies and other Bible translation instances follow a deliberate policy of translating the *meaning* rather than the *words* of a text. The *meaning* of the original text should be rendered as faithfully as possible in natural, understandable language. Our new Zulu translation should not sound like a translation. It should not be “translationese”, it should be isiZulu, the way good speakers of our language speak it when conversing with each other. It should sound as if Paul, Isaiah or Luke wrote in Zulu, not in Greek or Hebrew. Every reader should be able to understand the Bible, even without a learned minister to explain it to them. That is the reason why the Bible Society is working on a new translation.

We are not going to write a new Bible. We are prayerfully working on bringing out the full meaning of the Greek and Hebrew original in good isiZulu which every Zulu speaking person will understand. There are already a number of very good, idiomatic, understandable, meaningful translations in a number of the languages of Southern Africa, including isiSwati and isiNdebele, yet isiZulu, the largest language group in this country, still has no idiomatic translation of the whole Bible.

Misleading or inadequate translations

I would like to mention four examples of how a literal translation obscures the meaning of the original.

“Poor in spirit”

The first is from Matthew 5:3, which the older translations render as something like: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Even the 1986 Zulu New Testament (and the Swati of 1996) translate it, *Babusisiwe abampofu ngokomoya*. I have never encountered a person without theological training who understood the meaning of this verse. I remember that my teacher in standard 3 explained “the poor in spirit” to us as “retarded people”, “idiots”. Even many pastors do not understand what it means, because they are misled by the poor translations. What it actually means is, “Blessed are those who depend on God alone.”

“My soul”

Another example is the term used to translate the Greek term *psuche*, which is used in the New Testament to translate the Hebrew term *nefesh*. It is usually translated by terms meaning “wind” or “spirit” (*umoya*). In English it is sometimes translated with “soul”, as in Ps 103:1: “Praise the LORD, O my soul” (NIV). But in Hebrew *nefesh* never means “soul”. It means “throat”, “breath”, and usually: “being”, “person”, “life”. In combinations such as *nafshi* (“my *nefesh*”), which in Psalm 103 was here translated as “my soul”, it means “I myself”, “my whole being”. “Love the LORD with all your soul”, means “with everything you are”, “with your whole being”. This meaning should be kept in mind when translating this term. It means “the whole of a person” rather than “a spiritual part of him over against his material being or body”.

Irresistible, inexhaustible, all-surpassing power

Another example, from Ephesians 1:18-20. Here Paul is praying for the Christians at Ephesus, and among other wonderful things, he says that in his prayers he asks God the following:

1959: *ekhanyisiwe amehlo enhliziyu yenu, nize nazi okuyithemba lobizo lwakhe nokuyingcebo yenkazimulo yefa lakhe kubo abangcwele, ¹⁹nokungubukhulu obumangalisayo bamandla akhe kithina esikholwayo, ngokokusebenza kwamandla akhe amakhulu ²⁰asebenze ngawo kuKristu emvusa kwabafuleyo...*

1986: *Akanikhanyisele nivuleke amehlo nibone ukuthi linjani lelithemba anibizele kulo, nokuthi buhle kangakanani ubukhosi balelifa alinika abangcwele. Nibone nokuthi*

makhulu kangakanani lawa mandla asebenza ngawo ngaphakathi kithina esikholwayo. Yiwo-ke lawa mandla esabekayo ayesebenza ngawo kuKristu mbla emvusa kwabafileyo...

Now, if we read the Zulu, we notice a single word for “power”, to wit *amandla*.

If we read the Greek, we see that Paul uses four different words for “power”, “might”, “strength”. These four words emphasize different aspects of God’s power.

The first one is *dunamis*, the usual word for “power”, from which our word “dynamite” is derived.

The second term is *energeia* (from which our word “energy” is derived). This word emphasizes that God’s power is not static, idle, passive, but that it is actively working in us who believe.

The third term is *kratos*, which indicates the irresistible nature of God’s power.

The fourth term is *ischus*, which indicates the inexhaustable resources of God’s power. It is not like the power of ESCOM, there is always more than enough of it.

To these four forms Paul adds the qualification, *to hyperballon megethos*: “all-surpassing greatness of (his power)”.

Now I think you would agree with me that a literal translation of the Greek cannot possibly bring out the wealth of meaning of the original text, even in English, which uses different terms such as “power”, “working”, “strength”, “might”. In order to bring out the meaning of the original, one would have to rephrase (not paraphrase, rephrase) these verses more or less in the following way: “and I pray that you may also know that his great power surpasses everything, nothing can stand against it, there is no limit or end to it, and it is not idle, it is working in us who believe. It is the very same power with which he resurrected Christ from the dead...”

I would not like to be guilty of keeping the wealth of this verse from God’s people by an awkward, unidiomatic, literal translation. In the first concept of the new translation we translated it as follows:

Ngiyakhuleka ukuthi kwangathi ningazi ukuthi akukho lutho ongama phambi kwamandla akhe amakhulu edlula izinto zonke. Awanamkhanwulo, awalilaphi, kunalokho ayasebenza kithina esikholwayo. Wona lawo mandla amvusa ngawo uKhristu kwabafileyo...

Flesh

One last example: In the Greek New Testament there is a word that is frequently used, especially by the apostle Paul in his writings. That word is *sarx/sarks*, the basic meaning of which is “human flesh” (not “meat for eating”, which is expressed by the word *kreas*). This term is the Greek with which the Hebrew term *basar* is translated. *Basar* means

“meat/flesh/humankind”. In the New Testament it is used with a variety of meanings, such as “human body”, “humankind”, “mortal human”, “weak human nature”, and very often by Paul: “sinful human nature”. Let us look at a few instances of how it is used in the New Testament.

Matthew 16:17

NIV: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by (Greek: “flesh and blood”) man, but by my Father in heaven.”

1959: *Ubasisiwe wena-Simoni kaJona, ngokuba inyama negazi akukwambululelanga lokhu kodwa uBaba osezulweni.*

1986: *Ubasisiwe wena Simoni kaJona, ngoba leliqiniso kawulembululewanga **ngumuntu walomhlaba**, kodwa ulebulehwe nguBaba osezulweni.*

Matthew 19:5 (about the creation of man and woman)

NIV: “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”

1959: *labo ababili bayakuba- nyamanye*

1986: *laba bobabili babe **nyamanye***

Matthew 24:22 (used with the same meaning as in Mark 13:20 and Romans 3:20)

NIV: “If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive...”

1959: *Uma lezoxinsuku zingafinyezwanga, bekungesindiswe **muntu***

1986: *Ukuba uNkulunkulu ubengazinciphisanga isikhathi salelosizi, bekungayikusinda **muntu**.*

Note that, despite other differences in these two translations, even the very literal 1959 did not translate *sarx* with *inyama* here.

Matthew 26:41

(When Jesus in Gethsemane found his disciples asleep, he said to them),

NIV: “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

1959: *Umoya uyavuma, kepha inyama ibuthakathaka.*

1986: *Umoya womuntu uyavuma, kepha **imvelo yakhe** ibuthakathaka.*

John 1:14

NIV: The Word became **flesh** and made his dwelling among us.

1959: *ULizwi waba-nyama, wakha phakathi kwethu.*

1986: *Lowo oyiZwi wazalwa waba **muntu**, wahlala phakathi kwethu.*

John 6:51

NIV: “This bread is my flesh...)

1959: *Isinkwa engizakusinikela ngenxa yokuphila kwezwe **siyinyama** yami.*

1986: *Lesisinkwa engiyophana ngaso **singumzimba** wami...*

Acts 2:17

NIV: "In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people."

1959: *ngiyakuthulula uMoya wami phezu kwayo yonke inyama...*

1986: *Ngiyokwenza emihleni yokucina ngithumele uMoya wami ungene **kubantu bonke basemhlabeni...***

Romans 1:3

NIV: "as to his human nature He was a descendant of David..."

1959: *iNdodana yakhe eyavela enzalweni kaDavide **ngokwenyama** ...*

1086: *Iphathelene neNdodana yakhe eyazalelwa **ebantweni**, ulibo ohvadabuka enkosini uDavide...*

2011: *limaqondana neNdodana yakhe, eyaba ngumuntu yazalwa olibeni lwenkosi uDavide...*

Romans 8:3-9 (where the term *sarx* occurs no less than ten times in the Greek)

8:7:

NIV: "The sinful mind is hostile to God.."

1959: *Ngokuba ukunaka kwenyama kungubutha kuNkulunkulu...*

1986: ***Imvelo ebusa umuntu** iyamelana noNkulunkulu...*

2011: *Uma-ke nivumela inhliziyu yenu ukuba ilandele lokho okufunwa yimvelo yenu eyonakeleyo, lokho kunenze naba yisitha kuNkulunkulu...*

2 Corinthians 7:5

NIV: "this body of ours had no rest..."

1959: *Ngokuba nasekufikeni kwethu eMakedoniya **inyama yethu** ayibanganakuphumula...*

1986: *Kwale noma sesifike kwelaseMasedoniya, **imizimba yethu** yangakuthola ukuphumula...*

2 Corinthians 10:3

NIV: "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does."

1959: *Ngokuba noma sihamba **sisenyameni** kasilwi **ngokwenyama**...*

1986: *Noma siphila kuwo **lomhlaba** kodwa asiyilwi **impi yakhona**...*

2011: *Kuliqiniso ukuthi siphila kulo mhlaba kodwa izimpi zethu asizilwi ngezindlela zalo mhlaba...*

Romans 8:4

Here we actually have a combination of *ukuhamba* and *inyama*.

NIV: “we die not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit...”

1959: *thina esingabambi ngokwenyama kepha ngokukaMoya*

1986: *thina esingasabuswa yimvelo yethu kepha sibuswa nguMoya oyiNgcwele*

2011: *thina esingasabuswa yimvelo eyonakele kodwa esesibuswa nguMoya wakhe*

Range of meaning and translation

We have here encountered about *twelve different meanings* of a single term. These examples serve very well to illustrate a fact which the science of semantics can teach us, which is: The range of different meanings of words in different languages differ widely. “Flesh” in English and “*inyama*” in isiZulu does not mean the same in every case as *sarx* in Greek.

A second fact illustrated by these examples is that *if a Greek term is always translated by the same term in English, Zulu or any other language, the results can be very confusing and misleading*. The Son of God did not become *inyama*, he became a mortal human being like us – *umuntu odla amabele*. The promise of Joel was not that the Spirit of God was to be poured out over all *inyama* in the butchery, but on all humankind. People who have no theological training are in most of these cases very unlikely to understand the meaning of “flesh” or *inyama*. Some English/American people would understand it to mean “sex” or “sexual desire”. I have even heard a professor of theology displaying his ignorance about this term, so one can hardly expect the average church reader, whether a believer or not, to understand what *inyama* is supposed to mean in each particular context.

Making explicit what is implicit in the text

Another aspect of deviating from a literal, word or word translation, is the need to sometimes make explicit in a translation what is implicit in the original text. Let me mention a few examples of how this principle is applied in Bible translation.

The first example is from the prophecy of Amos, in *Amos 1:5*. There we read the following words: “The people of Aram will go into exile to Kir.” Now the mention of Kir says nothing to us, but we know from the same book of Amos, 9:7, that God had originally brought the Aramaen people from Kir. The original Israelite readers knew that very well, and when they were told that God will punish the Arameans by taking them back to Kir, they realised that God is reversing history by that act of punishment. They heard more

than the mere words of the Hebrew. There is implicit information. That is why I myself would recommend adding the phrase to the verse, “where they originated” (*lapho bavela khona*). Then the Zulu readers will understand as much as the original ones.

A second example is to me a very interesting one. In *Psalm 40:6* we read the following words: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced.” What does this mean, and how does it fit into the verse as a whole? Most people explain the piercing of the ears as making the poet able to hear God speaking. However, this does not fit well as a contrast to bringing offerings. But how did the original readers of David’s time understand this verse? I suggest that they understood it as referring to the custom of piercing the ears of a slave who did not want to be freed. You can read about it in Exodus 21:5-6. If a slave wanted to stay with his master for life, he was taken to the sanctuary, and there he stood with his head against a door and his ear was pierced. So what David is saying here is the following: “You do not desire offerings from me; you do not desire something of me, you want me myself, with body and soul, to be your servant forever.” Then it makes beautiful sense in the context. So if we translate I would suggest adding the words, “in order to be your slave forever.” Then one could also add a reference at the bottom of the page referring to Exodus 21, and for that matter to Hebrews 10:5-7, where this verse is applied to the Christ. If we omit these words, the result is that the Zulu readers understand much less from this verse than the Israelites who heard the Hebrew version.

Hosia 11:8: This is a very interesting example which we encountered just last week. God addresses the tribe of Ephraim, telling them that He still loves them despite all their unfaithfulness. The text says,

“How can I treat you like Admah?

How can I do to you what I did to Tseboim?”

It turned out that even the two translators, who know their Bibles well, could not follow the meaning of the text. Which of you can? If God had said “Sodom and Gomorrah”, I supposed almost all of us would have understood the meaning. Admah and Tseboim were the other two cities in the valley which were destroyed together with Sodom and Gomorra (Genesis 14:2 and 19:25). So I suggested to the translators to make explicit the meaning which few Zulu people would grasp in the existing text, but which Hosea and his audience understood perfectly well, and translate as follows:

“How can I overturn you like Admah?

How can I let fire rain on you like Tseboim?”

This brings to the fore another principle of sound translation, to wit:

The readers of this translation should understand as much from the text as the original readers, as far as is possible. A translation is a success in so far as the readers can understand the meaning of it. If they cannot understand what it says, then it is a failure. In poor, word for word translations, the teaching of the Bible is sometimes twisted, but not in good, meaning-based translations.

Better exegesis

The science of Exegesis, explaining the meaning of the Bible text, is constantly making progress. Many theologians study the Bible and sometimes see things which have not been noticed before. New and often better commentaries are published, which are an enormous help to Bible translators. New discoveries of ancient texts sometimes shed new light on the meaning of words which were not understood previously. This is one of the reasons why there will always be room for new translations of the Bible. I would like to discuss with you a few examples of how the Zulu translation can be improved by improved exegesis.

Can God lead us into temptation?

Let us start with a text which all of us know very well, to wit the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:13 and Luke 11:4 – the words, “*Do not lead us into temptation*” (*Ungasiholeli ekulingweni*). I would suggest, on exegetical grounds, that this translation is not correct. God does not lead us into temptation. In the letter of James (1:13) we read that “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone...” We do not even need to ask God not to lead us into temptation, because He will never do it. The point is that the Greek (*mé eisenenkeis hēmas eis peirasmon*) does not mean, “Do not lead us into temptation”, but rather, “Do not allow us to be tempted.”

The Lord Jesus was speaking Aramaic or Hebrew when he taught his disciples this prayer, and “to lead into temptation” in the Hebrew does not mean, “bring us not into temptation”, but “do not allow us to fall into temptation”: *Ungasivumele ukuthi sivele ukulingweni*. That is how I would translate this petition. And then the Bible would not contradict itself in Matthew and James, and we do not need any spectacular exegetical acrobatics trying to explain the difference between these two texts.

Can a child of God sin?

A second example of how more accurate exegesis is reflected in a more accurate translation is found in *the first letter of John, 3:9*. KJV translates it as, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin...” (Zulu 1959: *Lowo ozelwe nguNkulunkulu akenzi isono...*) How can this be harmonised with the same letter, 1:8, which says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (Zulu 1959: *Uma sithi asinasono siyazikhoblisa, neqiniso alikho kithi?*)

The cause of this apparent contradiction is to be found in the Greek tenses used in the original. In 3:9 the present tense is used. In Greek this does not mean that a child of God never sins, it means that he does not lead a sinful life. John wrote this letter as a warning to the churches against false teachers who taught that what one did with one’s body was not important, since the body is a mere prison for the spirit; impurity of the body does not touch the purity of one’s spirit. So they lead a sinful life while imagining themselves to be superior Christians because of a supposed “superior knowledge”. John tells them here that people who lead that kind of life are not children of God. That is why modern translations usually translate this text as the NIV does: “No one who is born of God will continue to sin...” The new Afrikaans translation is a bit disappointing here. The Zulu 1986 is better: *Yilowo nalowo ozelwe nguNkulunkulu akaqhubeki nokona....*

Chiasm

Another style figure found in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament, is the use of chiasm. Let me give you an example of it, and then it should be easier to explain. Look at Matthew 7:6 from the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs.
If you do,
they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.

Which animals might trample the pearls under their feet? Obviously the pigs. But which ones might turn and tear us to pieces? Looking at the verse itself in its sequence, it seems as if the pigs might do that too. But if we realise

that this is a chiasm, the first and the fourth parts of the verse belong together – the dogs will turn and tear us to pieces, and the second and third parts belong together – the pigs will trample the pearls under their hoofs. A good translation would therefore be:

“Do not give dogs what is sacred; they will turn on you and tear you to pieces; do not throw your pearls to pigs; they will trample it under their hoofs.”
Then every reader can understand the meaning.