



THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY

GUIDELINES FOR INTERCONFESSIONAL COOPERATION IN TRANSLATING THE BIBLE THE NEW REVISED EDITION ROME 1987

PRESENTATION

The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the United Bible Societies are pleased to present to all concerned a revised version of the 1968 “Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible”.

The document, now entitled “Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible”, affirming the spirit and following the principles set forth in the historic agreement first published in 1968, reflects the experience gained in producing scores of Bible translations since then. These interconfessional Bible translation projects have largely been made possible by those “Guiding Principles”; as a result of reports received from the users minor modifications have now been introduced into this new edition.

The basic understanding, however, remains unchanged: as in the past, interconfessional translations will continue to be based on a Hebrew text of the Old Testament and a Greek text of the New Testament which have been agreed on by scholars from various church traditions. Drafting and reviewing of the translations will be carried out in close cooperation, with the aim that the new text will be acceptable to, and be used by all Christians and Christian communities who speak the language into which the translation is being made.

The clear goal of this interconfessional effort is to produce editions of the Holy Scriptures which provide all speakers of the language with a common text. This will in turn make possible, often for the first time, a common witness to the Word of God in the world of today. To all who are interested in obtaining faithful and understandable translations of the Bible, this updated version of the “Guidelines” will, we pray, be an effective instrument for reaching this goal.

May God bless those who work to make His Word more widely known and lived, and through them bless all who will receive and read these new interconfessional translations.

Vatican City, November 16th, 1987.

JOHANNES Cardinal WILLEBRANDS
President,
Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity
Lord DONALD COGGAN
Honorary President,
United Bibles Societies
PIERRE DUPREY
Secretary
ULRICH FICK
General Secretary

GUIDELINES FOR INTERCONFESSIONAL COOPERATION IN TRANSLATING THE BIBLE

1. TECHNICAL FEATURES

1.1. TEXTUAL

1.1.1. Common Texts

1.1.1.1. New Testament: For joint translation programs, teams should base their work on the critical edition of the Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies, which is itself a joint effort of scholars representing Roman Catholic and other Christian constituencies. Translators should normally follow this text

for readings rated as A or B in The Greek New Testament but may choose other well attested readings when the text has a C rating.(1)

Though a critical text must form the basis of any adequate translation, it is recognized that in some situations certain constituencies may require that some passages of the New Testament found in the Byzantine tradition (as largely represented by the Textus Receptus) should be noted in the translation. When this is the case, such material may appear in footnotes with an appropriate marker in the text. The extent of textual adjustment will depend, of course, upon the local situation, and will need to be covered carefully by clear and detailed principles (see section 2).

1.1.1.2. Old Testament: The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, published by the German Bible Society, is recommended for use by joint translation committees.

In general the Masoretic text is to be retained as the basis for translation. Where, however, there are special difficulties in the traditional form of the text, scholars should make use of the evidence provided by recent textual discoveries and by ancient versions for other forms of the Hebrew text. New insights provided by related Semitic languages should be given due consideration though they may conflict with traditional renderings. In dealing with textual problems, the volumes of the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project, prepared under the auspices of the United Bible Societies, should be considered.

1.1.2. Canon

In many situations where there is a direct request from the churches, Bible Societies publish editions of the Bible which contain what some call the deuterocanonical books and others call the Apocrypha. It is the aim of the Bible Societies to provide the Scriptures in the canon desired by the churches.(2)

It is recognized that on the one hand an edition of the complete Bible bearing the imprimatur of Roman Catholic authorities must contain the deuterocanonical texts and that, on the other hand, while many groups within Protestantism have employed the Apocrypha, a great majority find it impossible to accept an arrangement of the Old Testament which does not clearly distinguish between these texts and the traditional Hebrew canon. It is suggested that these two positions are in practice generally reconcilable if in editions of the Bible published by the Bible Societies and bearing the imprimatur of Roman Catholic authorities the deuterocanonical texts are included normally as a separate section before the New Testament. In the case of the book of Esther the translation of the complete Greek text will be printed in the deuterocanonical section while the translation of the Hebrew text will be printed among the books of the Hebrew canon. The deuterocanonical parts of the book of Daniel will be presented as items in the separate section.

For Ben Sirach, it would be advisable to print the shorter text, as found in the main Greek manuscripts, while taking into account the Hebrew and Syriac texts. The longer texts, from other Greek and Latin manuscripts and eventually other Hebrew readings, could be printed, if necessary, in the notes.

1.2. EXEGETICAL

1.2.1. Exegesis

In view of the growing agreement between scholars of different Christian constituencies a common exegetical base should be established by the adoption of mutually acceptable commentaries and scholarly works.

1.2.2. Helps for readers

Both the needs of the reader and the traditional requirements of the churches can be satisfied with the following types of helps:

1.2.2.1. Alternative readings: those texts which represent a significant possibility of being original or which reflect a long tradition in existing translation.

1.2.2.2. Alternative renderings: different interpretations based either on ambiguities in the original languages or alternative means of expression in the receptor language.

1.2.2.3. Explanation of proper names: literal renderings of proper names when the meaning of the text depends on an identification of the so-called popular etymologies, e.g., Isaac, Israel, Jesus (at certain crucial points in the text).

1.2.2.4. Plays on words: the identification of related meanings of forms of words in the original language, e.g., pneuma meaning both "spirit" and "wind" (John 3).

1.2.2.5. Historical backgrounds: brief identification of historical individuals, places, and events which are related to so-called "secular history". Much of this information may be given in the form of maps (with ancient and modern nomenclature) and short explanations provided in a glossary and an index.

1.2.2.6. Cultural differences: explanations of social, religious, or cultural terms, e.g., (i) individuals or groups, e.g., Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, etc.; (ii) objects of radically different form and function, e.g., weights and measures (weights, measures and coins must be explained if a text is to be meaningful, and if this is not done in the text of the translation itself, the information must be supplied in footnotes or glossary); (iii) biblical

customs, e.g., “being seated on the right hand” must be explained as implying distinction and honor when in certain societies the “left hand” is the preferred location.

Notes (of type 1.2.2.1. through 1.2.2.6.) created during the translation process to aid the correct understanding of the published text are to be reproduced in all editions of the text.

1.2.2.7. Introductions: short objective guides for the reader’s help in grasping the significance of the Bible, testaments, grouping of books, individual books, and sections. Outlines, aids for understanding the discourse structure, and brief presentations of major themes may be included.

1.2.2.8. Cross references: the listing of other passages involving parallel content, similar historical events, quotations, clear cases of allusion, and parallel treatment of subject matter.

1.2.2.9. Section headings: the placing of identificational phrases as titles for significant sections. Readers are increasingly requesting the use of section headings in the text to facilitate location of passages, to indicate where a particular narrative or discourse begins, and to break up the otherwise heavy page of type. Such headings must be set off from the text by location and contrastive type face, should, in so far as possible, consist of words or phrases from the text, and should be identificational rather than interpretative.

Some committees have considered the possibility of explaining different sets of beliefs by noting that certain interpretations are held by Roman Catholics and others by other Christian constituencies. Such a procedure does not seem wise, for it tends to accentuate differences; nor is it necessary, since most diversities of interpretation can be covered more objectively by marginal helps on alternative renderings if the issue in question is important. Furthermore, most of the real differences of interpretation are rarely to be understood from a simplistic view of their being distinctively of one tradition or another since the differences in exegetical approach vary as much within one particular constituency as across confessional lines. Accordingly, it seems far wiser to identify various positions within the history of interpretation without labeling them as belonging to one or another Christian constituency. Where the differences are not of great consequence, it is better to simply omit reference in the interest of joint undertakings.

Most helps for readers considered above are located on the specific page in the text where the difficulty arises, but if such a note would occur frequently, it is often more satisfactory to summarize the data in tables of weights and measures or glossaries of difficult terms.

Restrictions on the types of annotations in no way preclude different constituencies from employing the text in publishing commentaries as separate volumes to help the reader to understand and appreciate more fully the nature and significance of the Holy Scriptures in the light of their own traditions. The publisher or publishers must do everything possible to insure that annotations are not offensive to any of the constituencies for which the text has been prepared.

1.2.3. Supplementary features

The addition of certain other features, such as glossaries, indexes, concordances, maps, illustrations, etc., should be considered for certain types of publications. It is particularly important that complete Bibles have adequate helps of this kind if the reader is to understand the text.

Illustrations pose more complex problems than any other supplementary feature, for there are many different concepts of what is artistic, and there are diverse views as to what is appropriate for the Bible. Furthermore, what is aesthetically pleasing and historically meaningful in one culture may be grossly misunderstood in another. Rather than employ merely “decorative pictures” (often of dubious artistic merit and of only passing relevance) publishers should provide background information or promote a measure of psychological identification and involvement by means of the symbolic and dramatic character of the illustrations.

When illustrations are to be included, it is extremely important that translators and translation consultant personnel have the opportunity of reviewing the illustrations, in order to insure that they do correctly relate to the text.

To serve the purpose of joint editions, a preface, if desirable, should be restricted to a commendation of the Holy Scriptures to the reader.

It is not the practice of the United Bible Societies to associate the names of translators or revisers with translations of the Scriptures.

1.3. LINGUISTIC

1.3.1. Orthography

Where different constituencies employ different systems of spelling, these differences should be resolved by the employment of carefully developed scientific principles before any significant steps toward a common translation of the Scriptures can be realized. It is important to recognize, however, that orthographic changes can be made at any time prior to publication, and it is possible for the translation program to move forward rapidly even when orthographic decisions are still pending.

Orthographic differences in newly literate areas are relatively widespread. They have often resulted from different language backgrounds and linguistic orientations of early missionaries. Changes in such systems cannot be easily made, but given a significant measure of good will and a concern for Christian cooperation and educational efficiency, it is usually possible to work out practical solutions. At the same time, it is recognized that the problems of orthography are not merely linguistic but are largely sociolinguistic. Cultural factors, such as conformity to a prestige language, and the psychological elements of efficiency and rapid reading are often more important than purely linguistic considerations.

1.3.2 Proper Names

Agreement must be reached on the forms of proper names before any joint text can be adopted or any joint translation presented for publication. Factors which complicate such agreement are:

- a) the traditional use by Roman Catholics of Latin forms as a basis for transliteration, even including certain inflected forms of Latin words;
- b) Protestant use of European languages as a basis for transliteration, most commonly English;
- c) the dominance of local, national, or trade languages, e.g., French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swahili, in contrast to systems employed by Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries;
- d) the attachment to particular forms of proper names as symbols of religious difference.

In the case of major languages with relatively long traditions, differences of usage can usually be resolved by following more closely the Greek and Hebrew forms with two major exceptions:

- (a) Old Testament persons referred to in the New Testament should have the Old Testament forms of names, and
- (b) certain widely known forms of names may be so deeply embedded in popular or local usage that they cannot be readily changed.

1.3.3. Borrowings

Borrowing is of two major types: (a) terms borrowed in the past by normal linguistic processes and often completely absorbed into the local language, in which case they are really a part of the vocabulary of that language, and (b) terms expressly introduced for the first time in Bible translations.

Roman Catholics and Protestants have exhibited two rather distinct tendencies in borrowing. For the most part, Roman Catholics have borrowed largely from Latin, while Protestants have borrowed from Greek, Hebrew, or modern European languages, with theological terms coming from Greek and Hebrew and cultural terms from European languages.

Borrowing of terms (other than proper names), e.g., words for "grace", should be kept at a minimum, since words not already used in the receptor language are empty terms. But if borrowing is regarded as necessary, it should generally be from living languages rather than from ancient ones. All languages have a sufficiently large vocabulary or sets of phrasal equivalents to make borrowing relatively unnecessary. For minor languages borrowing should be made from those major living languages from which the languages in question normally appropriate such terms as may be required by expanding technology, commerce, and social contact.

1.3.4. Style of Language

Any joint translation should aim at a style of language which would be both meaningful and readable in public. It must make sense to those both within and outside the church and be in a language which is appropriate for the importance of the message and which reflects current usage.

In language situations which have a lengthy history of Bible translation, the problem of "traditional" language has to be faced realistically, for such language is often of real value in pastoral care in view of its profound spiritual and theological connotations. Accordingly, insofar as is practicable, attempts should be made to incorporate such terminology, particularly in liturgical contexts, provided the resulting expressions are functional equivalents of the source-language text.

It is wrong to assume that only one legitimate type of translation in major world languages is required. Although it is increasingly less necessary to prepare different translations for diverse geographical dialects, many languages include significant sociolinguistic dialects. Such diversity of language and corresponding differences of purpose in translation suggest that more than one style of language may not only be desirable but necessary in many situations.

2. PROCEDURES

Procedures will differ radically, depending upon the nature of the project (a new translation or revision), upon the level of training and education of the constituency, upon whether the psychological climate is conducive to cooperation, and upon the adherence of one or another constituency to its distinctive traditions. In all tasks at least certain of the following procedural factors figure significantly in the development of a translation program.

2.1. CLIMATE FOR COOPERATION

Whether a revision or new translation can be undertaken jointly in a particular area depends largely upon the attitudes with regard to translation held by the respective constituencies.

These attitudes significantly affect the policy and procedures of the Bible Societies, which generally hold the publishing rights for the Scriptures on behalf of the churches. Therefore, any cooperative undertaking requires as wide an agreement as possible.

2.2. REVISION VERSUS TRANSLATION

In general, it is preferable to undertake a new translation rather than attempt a revision of an existing text. This makes possible the avoidance of undue traditional attachments, provides freedom to adopt new forms of language and a more relevant style, demonstrates a real interconfessional undertaking, and provides both psychological and scholarly bases for creative decisions.

2.3. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

For the most adequate development of a translation program, there is need for three groups: 1. a translation team, 2. a review panel, and 3. a consultative group.

2.3.1. Translation team

Consisting of not more than six persons of high competence from the Roman Catholic and other Christian constituencies and possessing four essential characteristics:

- a) comparable qualifications,
- b) complementary abilities,
- c) mutual respect, and
- d) capacity to work together.

Moreover, it is essential that these persons have the opportunity to give sufficient time to the work, for their goodwill must be matched by the opportunity afforded to carry out the program. Members of translation teams have sometimes been assigned tasks without adequate provision being made for their being able to carry through such projects.

2.3.2. Review panel

Consisting of not more than ten persons specially qualified to make a scholarly study of the text, exegesis and style. Roman Catholic and other Christian constituencies should be adequately represented on such a panel, keeping in mind that technical ability is one of the most important considerations for choosing members of the panel. The members should make their suggestions largely by correspondence, though for certain key issues they may be invited to sit with the translation team.

2.3.3. Consultative group

Consisting of up to fifty persons, depending upon the language and circumstances, selected for their position as church leaders and for being representative of different constituencies, ecclesiastical, political, and geographical. The members provide their assistance entirely through correspondence.

Often a project coordinator is needed to receive and circulate drafts, arrange for the meetings of the translation team and the review panel, and to coordinate the work in general. In most circumstances a secretary is essential if the work is to be properly presented and decisions adequately recorded.

2.4. TRAINING AND APPOINTMENT OF PERSONNEL

Members of the translation team and review panel should be selected very carefully after full consultation with all leaders involved, while the members of the consultative group may be named by their respective constituencies. To find the most qualified persons to constitute the translation team and the review panel, it is necessary to use informal decision-making procedures. That is to say, an extensive investigation is made by translation consultants so as to assess the technical capacities of such persons and the probability of such persons being able to work together effectively. After determining the availability of such individuals in consultation with church leaders, they may be formally nominated by their respective churches and appointed by the Bible Societies. It has often proved extremely valuable to arrange for an initial training program for prospective translators and members of the review panel as part of the extensive investigation leading to appointment. Such a training program should be conducted by translation consultants, who are then able to observe the work of each person while actively engaged in translation. The consultants' recommendations regarding members of the translation team review panel can then be made more objectively.

Translators are normally employed by their churches and not directly by the Bible Societies. This is necessary because after the completion of the translation project the translators will generally return to the work they had done previously. All conditions of service should, however, be established in consultation with the national Bible Society and the translation consultant involved, as the supervision of the overall program requires that a balance be maintained between members of the translation team, who come from different churches. In

most cases also the translation consultant will be the person most directly involved in training translators and proposing the approval of the final text of the translation for publication.

2.5. FORMULATION OF PRINCIPLES

To provide proper guidance to a translation program, to ensure consistency of the results, and to make possible creative collective efforts, detailed principles, must be worked out covering the entire range of technical features, e.g., text to be used, exegetical base, system of transliteration, level of style, etc.

An adequate formulation of principles provides the best guarantee of success of a translation or revision project. In the first place, adhering to such principles provides a high measure of assurance that the work of the translators will be accepted by the constituencies whose leaders have agreed on and accepted these principles. In the second place, formulation of such principles makes possible a more rapid solution of translation problems, since the persons concerned may argue for or against the principles rather than for or against each other. Furthermore, principles are a significant aid in the production of greater consistency in the translation, for even in instances where some principle needs to be changed as a result of later experience in the work, all previous materials can be adjusted in keeping with such an alteration of principles, so that the resulting work may be basically uniform. The translation consultant should assist the translation team in designing a set of principles that are applicable to the particular translation being considered.

2.6. EDITORIAL SUPERVISION

The translation consultant should take the responsibility for editorial supervision. Such supervision, however, does not necessarily entail constant “watching” over the work, but rather provides a means by which the translators may have guidance as to ways of solving those problems which arise during the course of the work.

2.7. COPYRIGHT: INTEGRITY AND USE OF THE TEXT

If joint translation programs are to lead to meaningful cooperation in the preparation of editions of the Holy Scriptures, it is important to avoid the production of different texts by different publishing houses.

If the result of joint effort is merely to produce different texts to be put out by different publishers, it is almost inevitable that within five to ten years the texts will be further changed and ultimately there will be different Bibles rather than a joint production. Even when the same text is put out by different publishers, it can become the object of very considerable pressure for a series of minor modifications which within a short time can add up to major changes. This does not mean, of course, that there should be only one edition of the Scriptures containing precisely the same supplementary or marginal helps, for a variety of formats and types of supplementary material can be useful in reaching diverse parts of a constituency. Nevertheless, once an agreement has been made as to a united approach to a translation or revision, it is wise to foresee the need of implementing this unity by continued procedures in publication.

The copyright of the translation and the published text is normally held by a national Bible Society or the United Bible Societies, but in the case of joint publication the text will be jointly copyrighted. If any constituency which has participated directly in the translation of a text has a concern as to the future integrity or use of the text, the publisher or publishers may deal with this concern by a contractual arrangement.

2.8. IMPRINT AND IMPRIMATUR

An interconfessional edition of the Scriptures normally bears the imprint of the Bible Society and the imprimatur of the appropriate Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authority. The most appropriate form for such an edition published by the Bible Societies would be for the Bible Society imprint to occur on the title page and the imprimatur of the appropriate Roman Catholic authority to occur on the back of the title page, this being the normal procedure for books properly authorized by the Roman Catholic Church. In some circumstances it may be wise to consider a preface including a joint recommendation by ecclesiastical authorities instead of a formal nihil obstat and imprimatur.

NOTES

(1) The Greek New Testament text employs the rating A for those texts in which the reading printed in the Greek text is quite secure. B indicates there is some minor doubt and C indicates that there is considerable doubt. For further explanation of this rating see the Introduction to The Greek New Testament.

(2) It should be noted that Roman Catholics generally refer to certain books of the Greek canon not found in the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament as the “deuterocanonical books”, while Protestants generally refer to these (and certain other additional books) as the “Apocrypha”. This leads to confusion since in Roman Catholic circles the terms “Apocrypha” or “Apocryphal books” refer to those books which were never received into the canon. Protestants refer to these books as the “Pseudepigrapha” or “pseudepigraphical books”. A common

terminology is clearly desirable, but the terminological traditions are deeply rooted and will probably need to be respected for some time to come.