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**THE TRANSLATOR AND THE UNTRANSLATABLE:  
A Case of *Horror Vacui***

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**The problem**

Those who read Ps 141.6b in a sample of modern Bible translations may wonder why the verse is translated in so many different ways.

- RSV then they shall learn that the word of the LORD is true.  
CEV Everyone will admit that I was right.  
NAB and they heard how pleasant were my words.  
NJPSV but let my words be heard, for they are sweet.  
EHS *sie sollen hören, daß mein Wort für sie freundlich ist* (they will hear that my word is favorable for them)  
TOB *eux qui s'étaient régalés de m'entendre dire*: (those who were invited to hear me say:)  
DB 1992 *og man skal erfare, at mine ord var gode* (and people will find, that my words were good ones)

In the new Swedish translation (SB) of 2000, the verse is not translated at all; it is indicated with three hyphens inside square brackets, [---].

Why this variety of renderings? In some cases, footnotes give the reader a clue. The Swedish Bible has a reference to the appendix, where in the article "Text" one will find a paragraph with roughly the following content:

In some cases the text is unintelligible and the variant readings differing to such an extent, that it is quite impossible to attain a reasonable certainty of what is meant, although some isolated word may occur, whose meaning it is possible to understand.

The French footnote of *Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible* (TOB) informs the reader that the whole passage vv. 5-7 “is very obscure and the translation of it uncertain.” NJV and CEV say something similar: “Meaning of vv. 5-7 uncertain” and “One possible meaning for the difficult Hebrew text of verses 5-7.” NAB adds some emphasis: “The text of these two verses [6-7] is very obscure and their interpretation quite uncertain.” The German footnote of *Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift* (EHS) asserts that “the Hebrew is not understandable.” RSV and the Danish Bible of 1992 (DB) have nothing to say, which must give an ordinary reader the impression that the line does not present any difficulties at all.

Psalms 141.6b and its nearest context, vv. 5-7, is just one example of passages where you will find abundant proofs of textual emendations, conjectural combinations, and interpretative inventiveness. Nevertheless, in the end the translator has to admit, at least tacitly, that the passage is untranslatable, if he or she applies the same professional criteria as when translating less complicated and obscure sentences. I am referring to passages which are untranslatable out of lexical, grammatical, and/or syntactical reasons and where a translation is accomplished only if the translator is indulgent towards these linguistic obstacles. I am not referring to ostensible omissions which depend on textual choices or dynamic equivalent translation methods.

If Bible translators find the Hebrew text untranslatable, what kind of text is it that they have produced in the translation into their own language? When a footnote says “The Hebrew is not understandable,” what then is the printed text a translation of? And if the translators prefer to do without footnotes, are they then really released from the responsibility of informing their readers that the text they read is just mere guesswork?

To leave a blank space in a Bible text seems to be an offensive act for many. That is why the subtitle of this paper ironically insinuates that some of us Bible translators might be afflicted with a quite irrational fear of the void, *horror vacui*. To admit that a piece of Holy Scripture makes no sense at all may have been unimaginable in times past. In our enlightened era, an overprotective concern for the readers’ trust in the word of God is apparently a decisive factor when a translator tries to translate against all odds. The verdict “untranslatable” is much more frequent in scholarly commentaries on different Bible books written by and for experts than in the translations or footnotes of the same books designed for common readers.

Another reason for this *horror vacui* is a professional, and very human, reluctance to admit a failure. Also, many Bible translators lack translational experience of other literary genres and other classical texts where this kind of capitulation is a part of the daily run of things. They may have an innate or subconscious feeling that the Bible has unique qualities not only as a religious document but also as a linguistic and literary artifact. Completeness is felt to be proof of perfection. Some translators, and not so few of their clients, are unfamiliar with a scholarly approach to philological and exegetical matters. In

some cases their background have made them immune to a kind of interpretative approximation common in older translations, confessional commentaries, and sermons. Therefore, their tolerance towards lexical, grammatical, and syntactical anomalies tends to be comparatively great.

But the reluctance to exclude untranslatable passages surely has more objective and honorable motives. Bible translators have, much more than literary translators, to consider the *skopos*, the implementation and the future use of the text they produce. They are obliged to anticipate the readers' responses, to show deference to the liturgical use of a specific text or submit themselves to diverse devotional customs. It may be acceptable for a translator, and even his clients and intended readers, to exclude Ps 141.6b, but he or she is scarcely allowed to leave out vv. 2-3 of Psalm 8, even if the translator should find both cases "untranslatable" according to the philological standards applied.

It is very hard to discern and to define the boundary between something that is extremely difficult and something that is quite impossible. I am convinced that all Bible translators in their heart of hearts will admit that there actually are some definitely untranslatable passages in the Bible, but are there a dozen of them or a score? Are there fifty or a hundred? Not even a group of recognized experts would probably pick out the same ten most obvious cases.

The boundary between difficult and impossible is unclear in another way too. An untranslatable passage may suddenly become translatable thanks to new findings or a new combination of previously well-known material. But the opposite case also occurs. A translatable passage may turn out to be virtually untranslatable after having been scrutinized by new methods or just analyzed more carefully than before. I give two examples, as reminders of this obvious but not always recognized fact.

The Masoretic Text (MT) of Mal 2.15a is generally regarded as damaged, and the lines belong to the strong candidates of untranslatability. Traditionally they are translated as in NAB: "Did he not make one being, with flesh and spirit: and what does that one require but godly offspring?" The first of the two lines is left out in the Zürcher Bibel (Zür) as "unverständlich" (unintelligible). In the Swedish translation (SB) both lines are excluded as untranslatable and consequently marked [---].

With the help of some emendations and with reference to the contextual background of Genesis 1–2, Markus Zehnder of Basel University has established a coherent text with pretensions to be translatable.<sup>1</sup> I lack the competence to assess Zehnder's solution, but if it will attain some sort of exegetical consensus, then of course our judgment of Mal 2.15a must change: the verse is not untranslatable any more.

2 Chr 11.23 has some acknowledged difficulties in the second part and is suspected as corrupt by some commentaries, but few translations venture to proceed further into the matter. As far as I have seen, no translation, except the Swedish Bible 2000, [!] excludes the verse referring to its untranslatability. In a recent dissertation, *The Text of 2 Chronicles 1–16. A Critical Edition with Textual Commentary*, Kjell Hognesius of Uppsala University and the Swedish Bible

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1 Markus Zehnder, "A fresh look at Malachi II 13–16," *VT* 53.2 (2003): 224–59.

Society comments on this verse.<sup>1</sup> The beginning of it has hardly bothered Bible translators up till now, but closer examination performed during the Swedish Bible Commission's work exposed such grammatical and lexical problems in regard to the first two verbs of the sentence, that the whole verse finally was classified as untranslatable. The traditional translation "He was wise enough to distribute" should actually be read as the meaningless "He understood and broke himself." The transition from "break oneself" to "distribute something," accomplished in many translations, seems to be an instructive example of how translators often tend to explore the polysemous potential in the target language instead of accepting the limited, unequivocal meaning found in the source language vocabulary. Is this not a symptom of *horror vacui*?

### The purpose

I will discuss a couple of untranslatable passages, which sometimes—or often—are translated in modern Bible translations and sometimes—or seldom—are left out. My examples are taken from the Hebrew Bible, the First, or Old, Testament, even if some instances in the Koine, the Second, or New, Testament could have been mentioned: Col 2.23; Jude v. 23. I refrain from exploring why they are untranslatable. Some ingenious solution to some of them may, of course, exist. I lack expertise in these matters and I therefore take for granted the unanimous statements of standard commentaries and the opinions of the experts I have been working with in the Swedish Bible translation committee.

My concern here is to see how Bible translators deal with obvious cases of untranslatability. How and by what means do they represent the impenetrable source text in the text of their target language when the resources of textual variants have run out, the conjectural ingenuity is exhausted, and the interpretative imagination is idling? And how do they mediate or conceal their own failure? I will also convey my own Swedish experiences of the reactions to a consequent marking and notation. I will start with this last aspect.

### Reactions

In the new Swedish translation, Bible 2000, there are sixty-seven gaps, marked [---], in the Old Testament, each of them representing a couple of words or up to one verse in the MT. Haunted by *horror vacui* from the start, it was rather late in the translational process that our Hebrew experts found it necessary to introduce this procedure. Some crucial passages, Ps 49.15 for instance, later deemed impossible to translate, had already been translated when the new guidelines were set up. For some members of the team this new decision was a distressing fact, amounting to a moral dilemma. How could we defend a statement of the untranslatability of a passage which we ourselves recently had translated?

But there is no genuine contradiction here. First of all, the borderline is inevitably blurred. And furthermore, we had consciously postponed the most difficult Bible books to a late stage of our work. It is in Job, Isaiah, and Ezekiel where the most typical cases of untranslatability appear and do so with much greater frequency than in other OT books. Now, when matters were brought to a

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<sup>1</sup> Kjell Hognesius, *The Text of 2 Chronicles 1–16. A Critical Edition with Textual Commentary* (Coniectanea Biblica. Old Testament Series 51; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 152–4.

head, we had to define our criteria better, which meant that we had to reappraise some previous decisions. What we learned from this was that the philological arguments should be calibrated from the beginning and the assessment of their consequences strictly coordinated. In Sweden the same team had the responsibility for all texts. The problem is more urgent if different teams work with different Bible books and the coordination, if there is one, comes in at a late stage and, of course, if the problem of untranslatability has not been brought into focus in the process. This may explain why some translations show such divergent praxis in these matters. The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), NAB, and Zür, to take three prominent examples, make some well-founded exclusions, but translate other, seemingly similar, passages without comment.

Some of the Swedish translators feared for the reactions from the reading public. Marked exclusions of passages in the Bible was a quite new device in the Swedish context. It turned out, however, that the sixty-seven gaps did not disturb the Swedish readers and critics too much. On the contrary, this procedure of exclusion, clearly accounted for in footnotes and appendix, seems to have contributed to the scholarly legitimacy of the new translation. It has even been appreciated as a sign of honesty and humility. And to put it another way, a majority of the Swedish readers obviously find it interesting, or even exciting, to be involved in the translational process. They feel that they are treated as grown-up, intellectually mature, and reflecting individuals.

Many readers, however, want to see footnotes which give at least some idea of the supposed content of a missing passage. In some cases, it would be possible to offer this service; in others, it would be misleading because the problem is that we do not have the faintest idea of the content. Another way to meet this highly understandable demand is to present a traditional rendering in a footnote together with the standardized information of untranslatability.

The sixty-seven cases representing the problem taken into consideration here are notated in Kjell Hognesius' forthcoming publication, *A Reconstruction of the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament. Readings Adopted in the Swedish Bible*. This edition will be an account for the Hebrew text established by the Swedish Bible Commission. I remind the reader of the fact that the sixty-seven empty spaces are gaps in the translated text, not in the MT, which is the basis for the translational and text-critical work.

## Examples

Genesis 15.2b is traditionally translated as in the Revised English Bible (REB): "The heir to my household is Elieser of Damascus." With small variations this phrasing recurs in most modern Bible translations. Yet, most exegetical commentaries assert that this cannot be a correct translation of the Hebrew text. Skinner says, "2b is absolutely unintelligible";<sup>1</sup> Speiser, "the clause as a whole is generally regarded as hopeless";<sup>2</sup> Westermann, *Der Schluß V. 2bβ ist verderbt und unübersetzbar* (The end of v. 2bb is defective and untranslatable);<sup>3</sup> and von

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1 John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1910), 279.

2 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 111.

3 Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (2. Teilband Genesis 12–36. Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 260.

Rad, “The conclusion to v. 2 is absolutely untranslatable (we do not know the meaning of *mshk*, and *dammetssek* cannot be translated ‘The Damascene’).”<sup>1</sup>

Emendations do not help; Gunkel alleges, *Der Satz ist sinnlos; die Versionen oder moderne Verbesserungen des Textes helfen nicht weiter; auch nicht einmal der ungefähre Sinn ist anzugeben* (The clause is void of meaning, the versions or the modern improvements of the text do not give any help. It is not even possible to give an approximate meaning).<sup>2</sup> Wenham seems to come to a similar conclusion; his proposed solution is explicitly very tentative.<sup>3</sup>

But with the help of translatable fragments and with contextual support from v. 2a and v. 3, it is possible to maintain that the content of v. 2b must be something at least very close to the translation given by the REB and many others.

How does a sample of modern translations deal with this problem?

1. They give a traditional translation without any further comments, e.g., New English Bible (NEB), REB, and the Dutch *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (NBV) 2005.
2. They give the traditional translation with a standardized footnote which embraces either,
  - a) the whole sentence, e.g., “Meaning of Heb uncertain” (NRSV), and “One possible meaning for the difficult Hebrew text” (CEV), or
  - b) just one part of it, e.g., “The meaning of the Hebrew for this phrase [one who will inherit] is uncertain” (NIV), and “héritier, *litt. peut-être celui qui verse la libation*’ (*sur la tombe du défunt*) (“heir, literally perhaps ‘he who administers the offering of wine’ [at the grave of the dead]”) (TOB, 1st ed).
3. They give the traditional translation with a more detailed footnote embracing the whole sentence, e.g.,

*Schluß des Verses in H unklar, daher Übersetzung unsicher* (The end of the verse in Hebrew is unclear; the translation uncertain) (EHS);

*Das letzte Sätzchen gibt die herkömmliche Auffassung der Stelle wieder; in Wirklichkeit ist sie unübersetzbar* (The last sentence gives the traditional interpretation, in reality the passage is untranslatable) (Zür);

*La fine del v. 2 è oscura nel testo ebraico, ma il v. 3 ne spiega il senso* (The end of v. 2 is obscure in the Hebrew, but v. 3 conveys the essence of it) (ITCL);

*H enthält ein nicht deutbares Wort: und der MESHEK-Sohn meines Hauses, das ist Damaskus Eliëser* (The Hebrew text contains an obscure word: *and the MESHEK-son of my house, that is Damaskus Eliëser*) (GECL);

*texte hébreu obscur; il est probable que le v. 3 en donne le sens général* (the Hebrew text is obscure, v. 3 probably gives the general sense of it) (TOB, 2nd ed.).

1 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (rev. ed; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 183-4.

2 Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (3 Aufl.; Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), 179.

3 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Milton Keynes, England: Word, 1987), 328.

4. They exclude the most obscure phrase without comment, e.g., NAB and the Danish translation 1992. In a separate text-critical register, edited by Svend Holm-Nielsen, the Danish translators offer an explanation: "MT has two more words, which are excluded here because a translation of them is uncertain and the text may be corrupt. The words could mean *he (that) is Damæsæk*. This last word LXX has interpreted as Damaskus. BHS a."<sup>1</sup>
5. They try to stick to the MT as close as possible, translating *meshek* as "steward" or the like and reproducing *dammesek* in different ways. In addition there is an either standardized or more detailed footnote, e.g., "Meaning of Heb uncertain" (NJV); Robert Alter, who gives a long explanatory background to his translation "steward";<sup>2</sup> Everett Fox, who elucidates his witty, paranomastic translation "and the Son Domestic of My House is Damascan Eliezer."<sup>3</sup>
6. They leave the sentence untranslated, marking the exclusion by typographical means. The Swedish Bible 2000 has chosen square brackets with hyphens, [---], and a standardized note for this case of exclusions. *La Bible de Jérusalem* (BJ) and New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) have three dots, ..., and an explanatory note for this specific case, "Text uncertain. V. 3b, which is additional, gives the general sense. The first time Abram answers God, he does so to express his uncertainty."

In other words, the vast majority of Bible editions prefer to present a translation of Gen 15.2b, although most of those, or all, must know that the translation given is hardly a representation of the available or even of the intended Hebrew text. Only in very few cases do the footnotes offer an explanation of all difficulties or do they question the translation as such. I think we have a communicative problem here, partly of a pedagogical kind, but partly also with ethical implications. Just a few translations, the Swedish and the two Jerusalem versions, exclude the passage as untranslatable.

The explanations offered are not always satisfying. It is not easy for the ordinary reader to understand in what way a standardized footnote such as "Meaning of Hebrew uncertain" relates to the many philological, interpretational, and historical uncertainties of other kinds and to the very "certain" English text the reader is studying. Does it say: "The Hebrew is awful here, but we have succeeded in decoding it in a clear and distinct way," or "This is just one—imperfect—of many possible translations of a difficult Hebrew text," or "We have tried to convey the uncertainty of the Hebrew into this English version (although we seem to have failed)." This last alternative is not just a mere joke, because there are translations which seem to let an uncertain source text be represented by a text with a corresponding uncertainty in the target language version. It is therefore perhaps better to use the standardized form of EHS: "The Hebrew is unclear, consequently the translation is uncertain."

A still better alternative is the CEV solution, "One possible meaning for the difficult Hebrew text," even if this, in the specific case, may be to say a little too

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1 Svend Holm-Nielsen, *Noter til bibeloversættelsen af 1992*. [Text-critical notes to the Danish Bible Translation 1992] (Copenhagen: The Danish Bible Society, 1997).

2 Robert Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary* (N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1996), 63.

3 Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (The Schocken Bible 1; Dallas: Word, 1995), 65.

much. The longer and more detailed explanations of the two Jerusalem versions or German Common Language Translation (GECL) are of course the most informative ones, but one should not use this kind of detailed footnotes too often in a common reader's edition. And this method will cause you trouble if your ambition is to treat similar cases with reasonable consequence. The footnotes of the two Jerusalem versions are very instructive, but they embroil themselves in obscure digressions. What exactly will these footnotes tell us about Abraham's anxiety in his first dialogue with God? Is it a psychological commonplace, or is it a comment on a rhetorical topic in the author's narrative technique, or is it a theological or dogmatic statement of some sort?

No translation puts the disputed passage of Gen 15.2b within square brackets, a method sometimes employed by EHS. One example from this German version is Isa 23.13, where the square bracket marking in the text is followed up by a footnote: *Text durch spätere Zusätze völlig entsetzt* (The text is in disarray due to later additions). This is an instructive way to treat the problem. One disadvantage is that square brackets normally are used to designate larger additions to the standard text, e.g., the endings of 2 Chronicles and of the Gospel of Mark, which incidentally are of quite different kinds. A second disadvantage is that one conveys the false impression that one's quasi-translation in fact is a fairly good representation of a just slightly damaged source text.

Which typographical device the translator will use to mark the exclusion of an untranslatable passage is of course immaterial. But it is important that the marking does not include or is not confused with other editorial considerations and manipulations. James Moffatt, to take an old but good example, is praiseworthy in his pedagogical ambition to inform the readers of many textual characteristics, including untranslatability, but he offers them with a rich but badly-arranged variety of signs and does not clearly differentiate between linguistic untranslatability and other difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

It must be emphasized that any procedure which implies that the translators present a coherent and continuous target language text, when the translators themselves assess the source text as untranslatable or at least incoherent, must be judged as misleading, whatever markings are used to state the provisional character. The reason for the judgment "untranslatable" is more often than not that the passage in question lacks grammatical and syntactical coherence, although it is possible to identify some words in the sentence. It is therefore deceitful to construct an illusory translation with the help of context, tradition, and a momentary disregard of grammatical laws concerning numbers and gender. This is the reason why the Swedish translators finally chose to leave out what we defined as untranslatable passages, to mark every lacuna with a recurrent symbol and to comment on the exclusion in a very general statement, applicable in all cases. We defined sixty-seven cases; others will perhaps content themselves with six or seven cases.

My survey of how different translations have dealt with Gen 15.2b shows that many of them prefer not to exclude this sentence, even if they quite often admit or insinuate the actual untranslatability. The passage has no greater theological or dogmatic importance, and its probable content is immediately repeated in the next

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<sup>1</sup> James Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible* (rev. and final ed.; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948).

verse. But it has a considerable cultural significance. Abraham's servant plays a principal part in the narrative of the wooing of Rebekah in Genesis 24, (although nobody can guarantee that the same person is meant). He is also a frequently occurring figure in Western art and literature. In that context no one has ever doubted that his name was Eliezer. In Thomas Mann's novel *Joseph and his brothers*, this Eliezer is patriarchal history incarnate. He has developed into an almost mythological character, an eternal communicator of religious insights and enlightenment.

It is tempting to do one's best to save the name of such a man and try to keep it alive in the Bible, and it would be linguistically correct to preserve the name Eliezer itself in the translation, even if the rest of v. 2b is excluded as untranslatable.

I have looked in some detail at two other passages to see if translators tend to be more indulgent towards philological rules when a disputed passage has a theological or cultural importance compared with passages which are insignificant in these respects.

Judges 5.8a has no specific importance; it is just two lines of the admittedly difficult Song of Deborah, traditionally translated as in NIV: "When they chose new gods, war came to the city gates." The translational panorama is the same here as in many other similar cases. Most translations stick to the traditional phrasing without comment. The only exception is CEV: "One possible meaning for the difficult Hebrew text." Some have chosen a variant Septuagintal reading, for instance Zür: *Die Opfer für Gott hatte aufgehört, ausgegangen war das Gerstenbrot* (The sacrifices to God had ended, there was no more corn bread). A few propose a conjecture, including another division of the Hebrew words: *On choissait des dieux nouveaux; alors pour cinq villes* (They chose new kings, yes for five cities), with (TOB) or without (BJ) an explanatory footnote. DB has chosen a solution of its own, referring to Deut 32.17 ("they chose new gods, which they had not known before").

The commentaries, on the other hand, do not conceal the fact that Judg 5.8a very likely belongs to the most untranslatable passages of the Bible: "The interpretation of the verse, especially the first line, presents baffling problems. Moore is probably right in maintaining that the true solution will never be known."<sup>1</sup> Gray asserts, "if the text is correct, the literal meaning is 'they [---] chose new gods'. The text is also in doubt in the following parallel colon."<sup>2</sup> Soggin states, "This verse is generally recognized as being corrupt, and it can no longer be restored."<sup>3</sup> A remarkable exception is Boling, who initially accepted that the verse was untranslatable but had been forced "to recognize a text which is mispointed in one word, but otherwise entirely consistent."<sup>4</sup>

The Swedish Bible 2000 marked the passage with its hyphen symbol [---], supplemented with the usual footnote, but this version seems to be the only one which seriously calls the translatability of Judg 5.8a into question.

With the treatment of Gen 15.2b and Judg 5.8a in mind, I had expected that a passage charged with theological and existential as well as cultural relevance such

1 Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5. A New Translation and Commentary* (ed. A. D. H. Mayes; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 239.

2 John Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (rev. ed.; NCB; Greenwood, S.C.: Attic, 1977), 280.

3 J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges* (2nd ed.; OTL; London: SCM, 1987), 86.

4 Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (AB 6A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 109.

as Job 19.26a in most cases would have been translated in solemn silence. I found, of course, that there are many who translate in the traditional way. A majority of the translations seems to follow the advice of the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project conveyed by the Translator's Handbook on Job, to "try to keep the Hebrew text, but adjust the translation with some conjecture,"<sup>1</sup> as the NRSV has done: "and after my skin has been thus destroyed." But most versions add a footnote expounding on the problems of this line and the many others in the neighborhood. Some examples include:

GNT	Verse 26 in Hebrew is unclear.
CEV	one possible meaning for the difficult Hebrew text.
EHS	<i>H unklar</i> (Hebrew unclear).
Zür (to vv. 25-27)	<i>Die gegebene Übersetzung dieser schwierige Stelle sucht dem Sinn des (in Vers 26 sehr unsicheren) hebräischen Textes möglichst zu entsprechen</i> (The translation of this difficult passage tries to be equivalent to the Hebrew text, which is very uncertain in v. 26).
NAB (to vv. 25-26)	The meaning of this passage is obscure because the original text has been poorly preserved and the ancient versions do not agree among themselves.

Once again SB 2000 is the only one who takes the consequences of the actual untranslatability by excluding the line, marking it with [---] as usual.

On the whole we can say that the readers of Job 19.26 in most Bible versions will meet a translation of something untranslatable. But they are in general fairly well informed about the troublesome character of the verse. Nevertheless it seems obvious that some translations go very far in their efforts to produce something plausible to fill up the line with, leaving, as for instance REB, a contradictory witness of their efforts in a footnote: "probable reading; Hebrew unintelligible." It may be that *horror vacui* grows worse the closer you come to a well-known, classical, and edifying passage of the Bible. But the main problem is that the possibility, or rather obligation, to leave the untranslatable untranslated, for some reason or other, is surprisingly seldom taken into consideration.

## Conclusions

1. There are untranslatable passages in the Bible.
2. How many they are is impossible to say—except for the translation team that decides which passages are untranslatable.
3. An untranslatable passage cannot and should therefore not be translated.
4. The lacuna should be marked in a consistent way.
5. The translating team should stipulate their criteria for untranslatability as early as possible.
6. It is an ethical imperative that the readers be comprehensively informed.
7. Untranslatability has been and can be displayed in many different ways.
8. An explanatory note should not confuse linguistic untranslatability with other kinds of textual or translational difficulties.

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<sup>1</sup> William D. Reymann, *A Handbook on the Book of Job* (UBS Handbook Series; N.Y.: UBS, 1992), 364.

9. The information given should make it clear that the translators' recognition of untranslatability is a token of respect for the Bible, not a proof of depreciation.
10. You shall not fear the void, but the fear of the void.

PAUL ELLINGWORTH

## “THOU” AND “YOU” IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The author is a former UBS translation consultant and former Editor of *Technical Papers for The Bible Translator* living in Aberdeen, Scotland.

One problem in translating the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is that of the frequent alternation between “thou” and “you” forms. This problem is usually neglected by native speakers of English using modern translations, since in modern English “you” is used for both singular and plural.

The Greek text, however, moves frequently between the equivalents of “thou” and “you,” raising two questions:

- (1) What is the reason for this alternation? and
- (2) How should it be dealt with in translation in the majority of languages, which distinguish between “thou” and “you”?

The evidence can be simply summarized. At this stage in our discussion, we take as a starting-point the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), a relatively literal translation based on a critical text, but we shall replace “you” by “thou” forms where the Greek uses the second person singular. The same result could be obtained more simply by using a rather literal modern translation in another language, such as the French *Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible* (TOB), but since we are writing in English we shall start from NRSV.

There are eight “thou” passages, of varying length, in the Sermon on the Mount:

- (1) “So when thou art offering thy gift at the altar . . . Truly I tell thee, thou wilt never get out until thou hast paid the last penny” (Matt 5.23-26; vv. 21-22 and 27-28 use “you” forms.)
- (2) “If thy right eye causes thee to sin . . . ; it is better for thee to lose one of thy members than for thy whole body to go into hell” (Matt 5.29-30; vv. 27-28 use “you” forms, and vv. 31-32 use third person forms, of which more later.)
- (3) “But if anyone strikes thee on the right cheek, turn the other also . . . Give to everyone who begs from thee, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from thee” (Matt 5.39b-42; vv. 38-39a and 43-48 use “you” forms.)
- (4) “So whenever thou givest alms, do not sound a trumpet before you . . . and thy Father who seeth in secret will reward thee” (Matt 6.2-4; vv. 1 and 5 use “you” forms.)
- (5) “But whenever thou prayest, go into thy room . . . and thy Father who seeth in secret will reward thee” (Matt 6.6; vv. 5 and 7-9a use “you” forms.)