

Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 10, Challenges in Translation, Cultural Issues, Part 2

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This is Dr. George Payton in his teaching on Bible translation. This is session 10, Challenges in Translation and Communication, Cultural Issues, Part 2.

We're continuing with our discussion of translation transfer challenges. Some of the challenges in communication when you transfer a text from the source text in one language to a target text in another language.

So, this is Cultural Challenges, Part 2. As we said, we have the context; we need to understand it. We need to understand the context of the situation and who is involved. We need to understand the situation within its cultural context.

We need to understand what the phrase or word is within the text or the paragraph within the text. We need to understand the sentence and the words that go along with the words in those sentences. And we need to understand the cultural concepts, the worldview, and word usage; all of those things help us to break down the meaning of the text.

And how does this then help us to translate? So, step one of translation is breaking down the meaning. Step two of the translation is how to communicate that into this other language. Okay, so we're looking at a passage in Genesis.

We had this difficulty when I was translating Genesis into the Orma language. And in Genesis 29, this is the situation where Jacob goes north to Mesopotamia, he meets his Uncle Laban. And then he wants to marry Rebecca, excuse me, Rachel.

And Uncle Laban pulls a fast one and tricks him. And in the night, he ends up marrying Leah. Later, he got to marry Rachel.

And then it says both women were still, they hadn't had children yet. Verse 31 of Genesis 29 says, Now the Lord saw that Leah was unloved. And he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben. For she said, Because the Lord has seen my affliction, surely now my husband will love me. So, we worked on this text.

My Orma translator and I read through the text in English: Rachel was unloved. Excuse me, Leah was unloved. Okay, now put it into Orma. And so, he translated into Orma.

And the word that he used was hated. Leah was hated. So, God opened her womb.

And I'm thinking, wow, that's a bit strong. The comparison is that he loved Rachel more than he loved Leah. So, it's a comparison.

And my translator said, That's all we have. We don't have any other choice. So, in investigating with him more, they have the word love.

And you know how in English, we can say, I love pizza. Or I love the Dallas Cowboys, which I don't, by the way. Or I love some other thing that we don't actually have an affection for.

So, we can do that. I like them, I kind of like them. I don't like them.

I dislike this. I hate that. I don't like that very much.

So, we have not only the two words, we have gradations of each one. And he told me, it's either one or the other. We don't have the distinction between liking and loving.

We don't have a distinction between disliking and hating. We have these two words. Okay, well, let's see what the Swahili Bible said.

Well, the Swahili Bible said, hate it. And I'm thinking, dang, now what do I do? So, when in doubt, read the instructions. When in doubt, go back to the Hebrew.

So, back to the Hebrew, and we checked this word, and the word was hated. That's their cultural concept. That's their mindset and their worldview.

That's how they view the world. And so, if someone doesn't like you, you'll say, that person hates me. If you do something unkind to someone, they will ask me why you hate me. Why do you hate me? I don't hate you.

Then why did you do what you did? And seeing this gives us a picture of what the text means when it says, God says, I loved Jacob but hated Esau. It's a comparison. It's not that God hates people, and God hates Esau.

Obviously, God blessed Esau. He had many sons. Even in the New Testament, the Edomites were the descendants of Esau.

So, God didn't literally hate, but that's what the language limitations were, and that's their concept of hating and loving. Fascinating. Okay, they are going to another example from the book of Ruth.

Ruth is loaded with cultural implications that we don't get. And it starts in chapter one. So, the scenario is Elimelech and his wife Naomi, and their two sons are living in the Bethlehem area.

There's a drought, there's a famine. So they leave and they go to the neighboring country of Moab. And they stayed there for ten or so years.

During that time, Elimelech dies. During that time, the two sons get married. So Malon and Killian get married to Moabite women.

But before they have any children with those women, Malon dies, and Killion dies. And then Naomi hears, oh, there's the famine has lifted in Bethlehem. There's food now.

And she says I'm going back. I got to go back home. I can't stay here in Moab.

I have no family here. I'm going home. And so, the two daughters try to go with her.

And she says, girls, don't come with me. And this is what she said: return my daughters, why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may be your husbands? Return my daughters, go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even get a husband tonight and bear sons, would you wait until they are grown? Would you, therefore, refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is harder for me than for you.

For the Lord, the hand of the Lord has gone against me. And we ask ourselves, what in the heck is she talking about? Getting married when she's old, having children, waiting for a husband. What's up with all that? That makes no sense.

At least it doesn't make sense in our culture and maybe even other cultures in the world. We don't know. So, this is referring to the custom of Levirate marriage.

Levirate marriage says in Deuteronomy 25:5-9, that if a woman dies, the brother of her deceased husband will marry her. Why? One thing, she belongs to that family and she deserves to stay within that family. Another thing is, she needs someone to provide and care for her.

In those days, people didn't have jobs. So, she can't go out and get a job. Okay, I'm going to go back to school and get my degree, and I'm going to be an elementary school teacher.

It didn't happen. When a woman is a girl, growing up, she's under her father. When she gets married, she's under her husband.

So, she was always under some male authority in that culture at that time. So how does she then provide for herself and for her children if she's an unmarried woman? So, the brother is responsible then to marry her. However, what if she doesn't have any kids? If she doesn't have any kids, as it says in Deuteronomy 25, the first son that is born is counted as the son of the deceased husband.

He takes the father's name and any possessions that the father has belong to that boy. After that, any of the other kids are counted as number two's children. So, you have this distinction between the widow getting married by her brother and the children that she could have.

Okay, so the only real example of this is in Genesis 38 with Judah and Tamar. Judah married a Canaanite woman. She had three sons.

And the first one married Tamar. And the text says he was evil. We don't say why.

So, the Lord took him. The Lord actually ended his life. So, what happens? The brother number two has to marry Tamar.

Remember what we said about what happens with the kids. She has no children yet. So what happens? Firstborn son gets number one's possessions.

All the other kids go with husband number two. And so, really, you're preserving the name of this person that died. And the expression in Hebrew lifts up his name.

In other words, to preserve it so that it endures. But he refused to impregnate Tamar because he didn't want a child who would inherit the property of his brother. Why? We don't know.

But he didn't want to perpetuate the name of his brother. So, the Lord took him, and he died. Okay.

So what? What is the point of all that? Well, the number three brother was too young to marry Tamar. Maybe he was 20, and he needed to be 25. Who knows? We don't know how long the period was.

But Judah sent her back to her father and said, wait until Shelah grows up. When he grows up, then he'll marry you. So, she says, okay, fine.

So, she has widow's clothing that she wears and she's continuing to wear that year after year until little brother grows up. And then he's of marrying age. Judah had a responsibility in the clan structure, in the family structure, to provide a husband for Tamar and to provide children for Tamar.

And those children would belong to the family. And Judah's family would be a part of that. So, Judah looked at the situation and said, okay, she married number one, number one died.

She married number two, and number two died. What happens if she marries number three? She actually might be the cause of number three dying. So we're going to hold off, and we're not going to let that happen.

So, he was actually not fulfilling the law that's in Deuteronomy for his daughter-in-law. Events happen. She eventually ends up sleeping with him and they end up having children.

So that is the only case in the Bible of this example of levirate marriage. So, responsibility of the family, responsibility of the widow's brother-in-law, and all of that. So that's the only thing that we have to go on.

So, what is Naomi talking about here? She's talking about, okay, I'm not your father-in-law, your father-in-law is dead, but I have a responsibility to provide husbands, but I can't. And even if I got married tonight and I had twins or whatever, it's going to be 20 years or more, 25, 30 years before they grow up. And are you really going to wait around for 30 years to get a husband? No, you're not going to do it.

That's ridiculous. So go back. Understanding that helps us to understand this passage in Ruth.

And this is why we said this kind of information can either be put into a footnote or, even better, what about a book introduction? If you read that in a book introduction, and your mind is heightened, and then you read the text, you go, I get it. Okay, moving on. The next cultural theme is found in chapter two.

So, the setting is that Naomi and Ruth are there. They're poor, they don't have any money, or they don't have much money to buy food. So, it's harvest season, and Ruth says, let me go and glean in the fields. So, they let poor people follow after the harvesters and pick up what little bits they can.

Maybe they get a handful, maybe they get a little sack of food. They can go home and do that. Then they come back the next day and do it again.

Let me go and do it in some person's field. And so, she found a man, his name was Boaz. And she came home with this big pile of food.

And Naomi says, where did you get this? And she says, from a guy, some guy, I don't know, rich guy, his name is Boaz. And she goes, Boaz? Do you mean THE Boaz? May

he be blessed by the Lord, who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead. In other words, may God, who watches over the living and the dead, bless Boaz.

And then she says, this man is a relative. It literally says this man is close to us. And then it says he is one of our redeemers.

And that means that he is one among others who could possibly redeem them. Your English versions might use different words there. A close relative is not really the word.

The word is redeemer. So we're trying to look at this word redeemer. What is the word redeemer? What are the connotations behind it? How is it used? And how can we then make sense out of this passage using the word redeemer? Okay, so it's in Goel.

Sorry, the word redeemer is Goel from the Hebrew verb gaal. And it's in Leviticus 25. And what does Leviticus 25 tell us? It says, first of all, if a person has a plot of land and they need to sell the land in order to get money.

If they want to get that land back, they need to buy it back. Well, he doesn't have money to buy it back, so he goes to a relative, probably a brother or something, and says, will you please buy the land back? Then, the land belongs to the brother who bought it back, but maybe they share the land. So, buying the land is one of the things.

He redeems the land from this person who bought it from his brother. Another thing is to pay debt. If the brother is in debt, he borrows money.

Sometimes they put him in prison until you can pay off your debts. Can you help me by paying off my debts? Yes. So he does that.

He goes and pays the debt for the brother. Then the brother is free of that burden, and he can then continue on. Another one is rescued from slavery.

We see that in Exodus, where God says, I will redeem you from out of the house of slavery in Egypt. I will rescue you out of it. So, in that regard, there's not any payment.

There's no exchange. God didn't pay something to get them out. He just did it.

And so, the word redeem can be used in a broader sense, figuratively, to mean out of this situation into that situation. Out of slavery into freedom. It's also used about God when talking about the Israelites.

He redeems them in battle, or he rescues them in battle from their enemies that they're fighting with. And so, it says God has redeemed us from the hand of the Philistines, or God has redeemed us from this other tribe. And so the word go'el or go'al is used in that case as well.

And so there are other usages as well, but we won't go into that. But it has this idea of you're restoring them out of this bad situation into a good situation. So you have that kind of picture going on.

So, Naomi is saying that we're poor people. Maybe this man would be one of the people who could possibly get us out of this situation and into a better situation—out of poverty into a comfortable life.

So, in chapter 3, Ruth goes and talks to Boaz. She says, you're my redeemer. I would be happy if you would marry me.

And Boaz then puts events into motion to see that that can happen. But there's another person who has the right to buy the land from Naomi. Has the right to redeem Ruth.

And that's in chapter 4. And so, it starts out with this. Now, Boaz went up to the gate. That's where the city council kind of people are: the elders who make decisions for the community.

Sat down there and behold the redeemer, whom Boaz spoke of, was passing by. So this brother is closer to Elimelech, the dead husband, than Boaz. So he said, turn aside, friend, and sit down here.

And he turned aside and sat down. Then he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, sit down here. So, they all sat down.

So, he's calling a council. He's convening court. Then he said to the redeemer, Naomi, who has come back from the land of Moab, has to sell a piece of land that belonged to our brother, Elimelech.

And when we say brother, that's a clan relationship. They all belong to the same clan and they consider themselves brothers. Literal father and mother? No.

Same family? Yes. The same line as all the fathers. You can trace them all back to the same family.

So, I sought to inform you, saying that you should buy it before those who are sitting here, before the elders of our people. If you will redeem it, redeem it. If not, tell me that I may know.

For there is no one but you to redeem it, and I am after you. And he said, I will redeem it. So, remember the first thing that we said? The definition of a goal is buying back the land from a poor relative.

I am getting it back into the family. So, this guy says, sure. Not a problem.

So that's where that concept of redeem that we talked about before comes into play here. It continues. Boaz is a really careful guy, especially in the way he lays this all out.

He's not being deceptive, but he wants to lay it out step by step and go really slow as he explains this whole situation. Then he says this, then Boaz said, On the day that you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance. What deceased? The brother Elimelech? No.

Elimelech had a son, Melon. Melon was Ruth's wife. Melon died.

So, in order to raise up a son for Melon who would then perpetuate Melon's name and who would pass on the inheritance down to this boy. Is that a part of goel? No, it's not. And what Boaz is doing here is they have a custom of providing a husband for the woman who's a widower, who's a widow, providing a son for this woman who has no children, who's a widow.

So, he's combining together leverage marriage and the concept of goel into one. So that Ruth is done right by it. We want to treat Ruth in the right way because she's a part of our family.

And you are trying to understand that and read that as a North American, it makes no sense to us. You read that, and you go, I kind of get it, but not really. And it's not anything that's wrong with us.

We are just not a part of that culture. And so, when you understand this, then you understand what's happening. And we have a sentence here that needs work and we need to figure out what's going on.

The Redeemer said I cannot redeem it for myself because I would jeopardize my inheritance. Redeem it for yourself. You may have my right of redemption, for I cannot redeem it.

Why did he refuse? First of all, he had, as they call in legal terms here in America, right of first refusal. R-O-F-R. My daughter-in-law is a lawyer and she told me that's a common acronym that lawyers use.

That person has ROFR, right of first refusal. So, this guy has the right of first refusal. He does refuse.

That means Boaz is second in line. And so then Boaz would be the one to do this. Why did he refuse? And what does this mean, jeopardize my own inheritance? So, my wife has her mother.

And when, as long as her mom is still alive, she's alive, she's in her 80s, she's going strong. As soon as mom passes away, then my wife and her siblings inherit whatever mom has. So, if my wife would say my inheritance, she means my inheritance that I stand to get.

The guy that's speaking to Boaz, is he talking about what he stands to inherit? Probably not, because he's an older man. He has sons, maybe grandsons, we don't know. But he probably has sons.

So what does he mean by my inheritance? And this is a translation issue right here. You look in some Bible versions, and they say, my estate, my property. And what does that mean with inheritance? Is that even a good translation of my inheritance? Again, cryptic language; they know the customs, and everybody knows what he's talking about.

And what he's probably talking about here is the things that my sons will inherit. That seems to be what the commentators agree on. So, it's going to ruin the things that my children will inherit.

How will it do that? Remember the whole concept of the Levirate brother. If he marries Ruth, the land that he got from Naomi, who does it now belong to? The baby that Ruth has. Does he get the land? No.

Moreover, she has more children. If she has more sons, he now has, maybe he has four sons now. Now he has six or eight or however many.

That means the property that he has is going to be divided up into more sons. That eventuality, whether or not it will happen, was enough to think, you know, maybe this is not a good idea. Maybe I need to just hang on with what I have.

Culture and all of that. So, he refused because he didn't want to jeopardize his sons getting less property of his. Fascinating.

And it's so rich. You read the whole book of Ruth. And it's so rich with culture and traditions.

And all of this is hidden in the word, my inheritance. So, what would we do? We would say something about my property. Then maybe a footnote, the things that my sons will inherit.

We don't need to explain it more, but a footnote explaining the concept of a brother-in-law marrying his brother's widow. That could be somewhere, maybe in the book introduction. Again, we're trying to fill the gaps for the reader so that they get the most out of the book that we can.

And we can't change the text. We have to stay as close as we can to the text within reason. And then this whole concept of redeem.

Okay. Also, in Ruth, we have the word hesed. Hesed comes up in Chapter 2. As we said in Chapter 2, Ruth goes into this field and starts gleaning.

And this field ends up being owned by a man named Boaz. And so Boaz asks his foreman who's over the workers, who does that young woman belong to? Oh, that's Naomi's daughter-in-law who came to Bethlehem from Moab. So he goes up to Ruth, and he says, You're Ruth.

I've heard about you. You can glean as much as you want. We have water pots here.

If you get thirsty, go drink some water from the water pots. We got food here. You can have lunch with us.

So, they sat down and had lunch together. And she said I'm from Moab. I'm this poor nobody.

I'm just this woman, this widow. Why are you being so nice to me? And he said to her, Because I've heard about your hesed, what you did for Naomi. And hesed in a lot of the Bible versions is kindness, graciousness.

And so, we get this idea that she was nice and gracious and kind. Some would say they are even loyal to Naomi. So how we translate this one word is important.

So, if you choose kindness, at least we're in the ballpark. So she ended up gleaning there. And she brought home a lot of grain for her and for Naomi.

Chapter three is when she actually goes and speaks to Boaz. He's asleep at night at the place where they do the threshing. And they have the winnowing of the crops of the barley.

And so, she goes there at night, and she lays down next to him. And when he's trying to wake up, he wakes up. Oh my goodness.

Who are you? He's startled by the person next to him. And she said, I'm your servant, Ruth. And the literal words that she uses.

Oh, by the way, in chapter two, I need to say this. After he tells Ruth, because of your hesed to Naomi, I'm allowing you to do this. And then he said this: May the Lord, under whose wings you've come for refuge, bless you and reward you for your hesed.

Fast forward to chapter three. Naomi says, excuse me. Ruth says to Boaz, Spread your wings over me, for you are a kinsman redeemer. Who said it first? Boaz himself.

Now she's saying it back to him. May you be my protector. May you be my person who looks after me.

May I find security and safety and peace and provision and everything else. In your home. And he says to her, This hesed is more than your first one.

This hesed is greater than your first one. Which hesed are we talking about? What did she do this time? Well, she could have married someone else. She didn't have to do this brother-in-law thing.

And he says you could have married somebody younger. You could have married somebody rich, somebody poor. You'd had that choice.

And he chose not to. You chose to get married to me. Or someone in our family.

So, in one sense, she was being loyal to her dead husband. If she married somebody outside the family, I think that that person is not bound by this left-right thing. That the children would then belong to that guy.

I think. I'm not sure. But I think so.

By agreeing to marry somebody in Boaz's family or in his clan, she's preserving the name of her husband. She is preserving, as we saw in Chapter 4, she's preserving his line. The child gets the property.

All those things were contingent upon her marrying somebody in that family. And so maybe if we look at this, that word loyalty might actually be a better translation of hesed in this context. And there certainly is a case for it.

Some people think that loyalty might even be the primary sense of hesed in the Old Testament. Because of your loyalty to Ruth, does that, excuse me, because of your loyalty to Naomi in Chapter 2, does that make sense? It certainly does. Because of your loyalty to our family, does that make sense? It has a strong case for it.

So maybe loyalty would be a better translation here. Or faithfulness, rather than goodness, kindness, or graciousness. So we're trying to find the words that communicate the meaning the best way.

So, should it be translated as kindness? Maybe not. So remember, every word that we use and every phrase that is used is situated in a conceptual and actual part of that culture. So the way that they think and perceive, it's a part of that.

The way that they have normal activities and practices, like the levirate marriage, like the go'el, it's all situated in that together. So we translate the sense of the word in that particular context. So if hesed can mean more than one thing, if it means faithfulness or loyalty in one, then we use that word in the translation.

If it means graciousness and kindness in a different one, then we use that in the translation. So we always translate the sense as dictated by the context that it's in. Thank you.

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