

Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 25, Order of Events

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This is Dr. George Payton and his teaching on Bible Translation. This is session number 25, Order of Events.

In this discussion, we're going to be talking about how events are presented in the Bible and the order in which these events are presented.

In English, we don't always have to tell things in chronological order. Sometimes, we change the tenses from normal conventions to recounting things that took place. For example, you might say, this guy comes up to me and asks for help, so I go, I can't help you right now. I'm late for work.

Then he says, but I really need help. I was late all that week, so I couldn't really be late again. What did I do here? One thing I did was I told it in the present tense.

This guy comes up to me, and I go. Notice we use go to say I said something. So I go, I can't help you right now.

And then he says, so everything is in the present tense even though it's a past occurrence. Then, I throw in the background information in the past tense. Interesting, isn't it? We can do that in English.

We can't always do that in other languages. And as we said, the information in the last sentence, I was late all that week, is out of chronology to me telling you what this guy did, and he came up to me. But in a lot of languages around the world, they don't allow for the unchronological presentation of information.

It's much clearer to relate the events in the proper order in which they occurred. In the New Testament and in the Old Testament, at times, events are told out of chronological order. And these passages are translated.

If they use the Greek form, it might be really confusing to the audience. For example, in Acts 12:23, an angel of the Lord struck him, and he was eaten by worms and died. We talked about that in the previous discussion.

When did the worms start eating him? Probably after he died. The worms probably didn't kill him. Another one is the parable of the Good Samaritan, he bound up his wounds by pouring oil and wine.

Probably. He poured oil and wine on the wounds, wine being there as a cleaning agent. They didn't have antiseptics.

Oil was used as a soothing agent. They didn't have balm and ointments. And then you bandaged the wounds after that.

In another one from Revelation 5:2, the angel says, Who is worthy to open the scrolls and break its seals? How can you open it before you break its seals? You can't. You have to do what? Break the seals first. Here's another example from the book of Jonah.

Jonah is confronted by the men when they realize that he is the cause of the problem. And in 1:9 and 10, he said to them, I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord God of heaven. Who made the sea and the dry land? The men became extremely frightened.

And they said, why have you done this? For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord because he had told them. And that information is out of order. And so, what we try to do is, and how do we know that it's out of order? Because we have the part about what he told them at the end of verse 10 and then being afraid at the beginning of verse 10.

And the fact that he told them was the thing that made them afraid. And so this doesn't follow the normal sequence. And if we translate it literally or translate using this particular form into a language that doesn't allow for unchronological events, they're confused.

And we can make sense of it because we're used to reading. We're used to a long literary tradition. We're used to having things that are not exactly chronological.

But what about a group of people maybe that have an unwritten language, and you're starting for the first time like we did in Orma? They don't have a literary style. But even for people with a literary style, you read this, and you go, and that's kind of weird.

So, does it communicate clearly? Yeah, probably. Is it natural in English? No, it's not. It doesn't sound natural to me as a native English speaker.

Okay, so the first thing we do is we're going to break down what happened and in what order. So, first of all, we know that verse 9 comes first. They confront him, and he says, I'm a Hebrew, and I worship God.

The next thing is that he told them that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. Then they become frightened. Then they say, what have you done? The next step is to rewrite the verse, making it flow more smoothly according to chronological order.

Then, he told them that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. The men became extremely frightened, and they said to him, what have you done? So, if you compare that to the one above, is it better? Does it flow more easily or more smoothly? And this is what we need to decide. Again, any time I offer a suggestion like this is a suggestion, not a; thou shalt not do this way.

So it's one possibility, but the thing is, we're trying to raise awareness of things that are challenging in the text so that we can be aware of them and then possibly deal with them. One of the ways that we can find out whether or not it communicates well is to try to get people from the community who have not been a part of the transition process, and then we sit them down. They can be believers; they don't have to be believers; they can be anyone in the community.

And then say, can you tell me in your own words what happened? And then you listen. Did they leave anything out? Did they change the information? Were they confused? Maybe they say, I'm not really sure because this is kind of strange. Why is this strange? Well, so they might tell you that it is out of order.

Or I'm not sure how things happen because it's worded funny. Maybe they can't even tell you what they say, it doesn't sound right. But getting that kind of feedback is one way of verifying. Yeah, there is a problem; we need to make some adjustments to the text.

So, on occasion, this non-chronological thing goes beyond just one verse to more than one verse. For example, in Mark 1:43 and 44, Jesus heals the leper, verse 43, and they sternly warned him and immediately sent him away. And he said to him, go show yourself to the priest.

Wait a second, and he sent him away. Did he shout at the guy after the guy was walking away? Oh, by the way, you need to do this. This is what Luke says.

Luke 5:12, same event, and he orders him to tell no one. But go, show yourself to the priest. So, we have two witnesses to the same event, Mark and Luke, as it were.

And they word it in different ways. But we can't just say, well, let's make Mark like Luke and harmonize. We don't harmonize because we want each author to be able to tell the story in his own way, using his knowledge, his command of the language, and his choices for writing.

And we all know that you can have one event told by more than one person, and they'll all tell it in a slightly different way, because that's just their own bet, that was their own preference of how to say it. So, we're not saying harmonize. But one of the things that we can do is restructure the order so that verses 43 and 44 are switched.

Is that a good idea? Well, let's take a look at that. That might be okay, but it might also disrupt the flow of the information in the text. So, this is what it is now.

And he sternly warned him and immediately sent him away. And he said to him, see that you say no, nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them. But he went out and began to proclaim it freely.

So, this is what it would look like if we rearrange and put verse 44 before verse 43. And he said to him, see that you say nothing to anyone, but go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them. And he sternly warned him and immediately sent him away.

But he went out and began to proclaim freely. It kind of sounds okay, but there's something you might be a little bit uncomfortable with. There's something really impactful when it says, say nothing to anyone, but he went out and said things to people.

So, the juxtaposition of those two sentences really has a connection there. And if we break that connection, we might be losing something in the translation. We might be doing something to the text that maybe wouldn't be the best thing.

So, if we don't restructure the sentences, what do we do? Another option is to just add some clarifying words to make it clear the sequence of events and how things happened. And one way is to say in verse 43, And he sternly warned him as he sent him away, and he said. Okay, this expression where he sternly warned him and sent him away, and he said to him, sounds a lot like the way that Hebrews tell stories.

They say the general first and then the specific after. We had that in previous discussions. Is that happening here? This might be a Hebrew overlay onto the Greek because the men who wrote the New Testament were all Hebrews, even though they were fluent in Greek enough to write it.

And then you say, okay, why does it sound so funny like this? This could be a Hebraism that's brought into the Greek text. And they're telling a story the way that Hebrews normally tell stories. We get this again in another well-known passage, when Jesus is sending out the twelve.

And it says, this is in Mark 6, and it says, And he sent them out to go and preach. The next sentence says, And he told them. So, it sounds like they're already gone.

Same thing as here. And he told them to carry no money bags with them, etc., etc. So this is a common thing that we get over and over and over, where the general statement is first, and then the specific details are provided.

So, the second option here is one possibility. We just add a couple of words. Again, we're not adding information to the text.

We're just trying to make it more understandable and make it flow more easily. Okay, another one, Mark 5. It seems like there are a lot of these in Mark. Mark 5, 1-7.

They came to the other side of the sea in the country of the Gerasenes. When he got out of the boat, a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit immediately met him. And he had his dwelling among the tombs, but no one was able to bind him anymore, even with a chain, because he had often been bound with shackles and chains, and the chains had been torn apart by him, and the shackles broken into pieces, and no one was strong enough to subdue him.

Consequently, night and day, he was screaming among the tombs and in the mountains and gashing himself with stunts. Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before him. So, the question is, is that totally chronological? We do see in Mark 2, in verse 2, this general statement.

And then we're given the details of how everything happened, and that immediately goes to a back reference, a flashback to what happened. Interesting. What can we do? I will not suggest reordering these words.

You can't reorder this. This is too much. Can you see something like this in verse 2? When he got out of the boat, a man ran toward him.

And then, in verse 6, when he saw Jesus at a distance, then he ran up to him. That might help it a little bit. Remember, verse 6, seeing Jesus, and seeing is a what? Participle.

What is the function of the participle here? A function of time reference. And so when he saw Jesus, would be one way of translating that. But adding that, the man ran toward him, rather than the man was face to face with him already.

Later in that passage, as he was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed was imploring him to go with him and to accompany him. That one seems fine. Before Jesus left, he said that to him.

Here's what Luke says. Now, all the people of the country of the Gerasenes and the surrounding district asked him to leave them, for they were gripped with fear. And he got into the boat and returned.

But the man from whom the demons had gone out was begging him that he might accompany him, but he sent him away, saying, at the end of verse 37, he got up and left in the boat. In verse 38, the man comes up to him. Again, you see how this tension is there? Can we say before he left, the man ran up to him in verse 38? Just adding something a little bit more.

It's realistic to what exactly happened by saying before he left. So we're not violating the actual events; we're not depicting something that's incorrect or false. We're just trying to present it in a way that makes more sense to people.

Because I will tell you, people will take them literally, and they will say, this happened, and then this, because that's the way it's written. And we need to be very careful that we don't get the wrong impression. So, what adjustments are necessary to communicate so that it makes logical sense to people in the target language? I hope that you're starting to feel the tension.

There are actually a number of these in the whole Bible, both in the Old Testament and New Testament, that we have to wrestle with. And it's something that, as a pastor speaks and gives a message, they can explain it in their message very easily, but we don't have that luxury. Someone is not there to explain this to the people who are reading it.

Someone just has a book, and they're reading the book, maybe by themselves or maybe with other people. So, there are a couple of questions, if I can play devil's advocate. Is it okay to add clarifying words to the text? Are we putting things into the text? Is it okay to reorder the verses? What do you think? The problem arises from the Hebrew literary style and the way that they recount past events.

We're not changing any of the information in the text. We're changing the presentation of the information in the text. And when the biblical text, for example, we've seen other places where the grammatical style of Greek or Hebrew doesn't fit the grammar of the target language, we adjust the grammar.

It's not an information issue. It's been a grammatical issue. In the same way, if there's a literary style issue that does not fit the literary style or the narrative style of the target language, then we have a responsibility to adjust the text so that it matches the normal way that people communicate.

Some may not be convinced by what I just said, but at least you really need to think about this, and you need to have an answer for this. As I said before, if we try to

follow the Greek or Hebrew form, we will do a disservice to the people who are reading it if we do not provide the information in a footnote or somewhere else. We can't have a form-based translation and no footnotes.

Otherwise, people will be confused. And if they're confused, that means they don't understand. And if they don't understand, the question is, have we translated? Have we translated well? I will tell you, as a speaker of multiple languages, that if I say something to someone in their language and they don't get it, it's on me to then clarify to make sure that they do get it.

No, that's not what I meant. I meant this. What about in translation? I would say it's a similar thing because it's all human communication, and we're after effective communication. We're after impactful communication.

So, we do try to maintain the semblance to the biblical text as much as we can. And if adjustments are necessary, I think the first thing that I tend to try to do is we try to make those little adjustments first. Can the little adjustments help enough? And if the people read it, and it may not be 100% national, but at least it's a little bit better, we try to do that first.

The option to reorder the verses is sometimes preferable. Sometimes, it's almost necessary. In those cases, we need to be really careful to determine the order of events that happened and then reorder the verses accordingly.

But we usually don't do more than two verses or maybe a maximum of three. Remember the passage about Mark, the demoniac that runs up to Jesus, and there were like seven verses. There is no way in the world that anyone would approve of tearing it apart and putting it into a completely different order.

But what about if it does need to happen? Can we at least do it in one, two, or three verses? Remember, we need to keep the overall flow of information and style intact, even if we do reorder verses. So, what are we talking about? Let's look at an example. Okay, this is from Mark, and in Mark 6, people were saying who Jesus was.

Some people were saying it was the Old Testament prophet. But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, John whom I beheaded has risen. So, Herod thought that Jesus was John coming back to life.

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison according to the account of Herodias. The wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

What happened first? To see all that tension there in verses 17 and 18, this is, again, what? A flashback. Until we get flashbacks, we will have problems, as we've already seen in this discussion today. So what do you do? Well, the first problem is that John had already died even before verse 16.

So, when Herod said that, this was after John was killed. This creates a chronological problem between verses 16 and 17. Then, the flashback tells how John came about to die, and that information is given, but notice that the flow of information is really hard to follow.

You sit there, and you go, sorry. So, if I read that to you and asked you, can you tell me what happened? And unless you have it in front of you, if you just heard it, you might be confused and unable to tell me what happened. And we know that John had told Herod that he shouldn't marry, he shouldn't have married, I should say, Philip's wife.

And that happened before Herod even arrested John. So what do we do? How do we handle this text? This is definitely one of the harder passages for Mark to translate. As we know, many people start with the book of Mark when they translate it into another target language.

And allegedly, oh, Mark is the shortest. And the Greek in Mark is straightforward. Therefore, it's the easiest to translate.

How many problems in this series of lectures that I've given have come from Mark's book? Right. Okay. So, everyone has to deal with this.

These are problems that every translator has to deal with because they are inherently present in the Greek text. So, what do we do? So, the first task is to break down the actual order in which things happen. And the first thing that we do as we list, well, how are they mentioned? So, they are mentioned in this order.

First, Herod sent men. Verse 17 and 18, this is what we're doing. We're just writing down the events. Herod sent men, and men seized John, and men tied John up, and men put John into prison.

And Herodias was incited, or she was angry, and she pushed Herod to arrest John. Herodias was the wife of Philip. Philip was the brother of Herod.

Herod married Herodias. John said to Herod, it's not right that you took your brother's wife. That's how it's listed in the event.

These are the events that are listed in these two verses. So now that we've written them down, let's rearrange them and put them in chronological order. John, the writer of John, could have listed them this way.

And we know that Philip was the brother of King Herod, and we know that Herodias was Philip's wife. We know that Herod took her from Philip and married her. And John, as a prophet, could speak truth into people's lies.

John said to Herod, it's not right that you took your brother's wife. And then Herodias got upset and incited Herod to arrest John. So Herod sent men, men seized John, men tied up John, and put John in prison.

What does that look like once we reorder it? Remember what we do? We discover a problem. We try to write it out in our language of wider communication first, whether it's English or Spanish or whatever. And then we say, okay, now that we have this down on paper and we've teased it out and we've cleaned it up and we have this document or this paragraph that's in the local language, now let's try to translate that into the local language.

But we start by doing it in English or the other language. So we rewrite the information in order, and then we add a connection to verses 16 and 17 because, remember, this is a flashback. Many times, languages will have some kind of word or phrase that clues the listener or the reader that this is a flashback.

So here's what it was, and here is one suggested rendering. And it was that Philip was the brother of King Herod and Herodias was the wife of Philip. Herod took and married Herodias.

Then John came and said to Herod, it is not right that you took your brother's wife. Herodias incited Herod to arrest John. So, Herod sent men.

They seized John, bound him, and put him in prison. In verse 19, Herodias has a grudge against John, and she actually encouraged John and encouraged Herod to kill John, but Herod was afraid to do so. And as you read that, hopefully, that is a little bit more clear.

Maybe it's a lot more clear. But that's a much easier passage to translate than the one above. So, unchronological events are not gaps in communication.

We've been talking about gaps in communication. It's not a gap per se. There's nothing missing.

All the information is there. Nothing is left out. But the way that it's presented is a barrier to communication.

The biblical text is not communicated in a clear way or in a natural way. So we remember that our goal is effective communication, impactful communication, and we aim to remove stumbling blocks in the biblical text as much as possible because if the text is too hard to read, people won't read it. They'll give up.

So, rearranging the information, and maybe even verses, is one way to remove the difficulty so that it can impact the people who read it. Thank you.

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