

Views from the Pews: a Translator's View on the Māori Magnificat

Last week, I mentioned that the team translating the Bible into Māori is fortunate that many of the potential difficulties in finding equivalents for special terms of Judaeo-Christian concepts were solved in the 19th Century. While this is largely true, there have proved to be one or two points where some extra thought has been needed.

The 'Magnificat', the 'Song of Mary' (Luke 1:46-55), though we have it recorded only in Greek, is a classic example of Hebrew poetry, whose principal form involves in each verse two half verses, the second of which complements, contrasts with, or expands the first. The song begins, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord: and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my Saviour.' The question is how to render 'soul' and 'spirit' into Māori, which has its own set of terms for the 'internal' aspects of humankind. The most recent revision of the Māori Bible in 1952 uses *wairua* for both, but this is not satisfactory really, because of the repetition, and because it misses a distinction. In fact, *wairua* is ideal for 'soul', as it means the immortal, essential part of a person. It is also used for 'spirit' as in the 'the Spirit of God' in Genesis 1, and 'Holy Spirit'. However, in the present context, *ngākau* is a better word for 'spirit' as it is the seat of emotions, it is that part of person which can feel joy.

One final aspect of the translation work to mention briefly is the treatment of what are called idioms. These are expressions like 'to kick the bucket' which have a meaning quite different from their literal sense.

One striking idiom which occurs in Hebrew is part of what seems to be a fixed expression, 'The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.' It occurs in Exodus, Jonah, the Psalms, Jeremiah, and Joel. The section translated as 'slow to anger' is literally 'having a long nose'!

Translating idioms literally from one language to another can often lead to ridiculous or completely nonsensical text!

Spare a grateful thought for the long history of those to whom we owe the range of English Bibles we have at our disposal, from King Alfred, through William Tyndale, John Wycliffe, the team of scholars responsible for the King James version, and many others, right up to the present.

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