

Message
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Found in Translation

by Donne Hayden

Years ago, during my first visit to England, we stayed with a family in London. As we went up the stairs in the evening, our hostess asked, “Shall I knock you up in the morning?” It took me a minute to understand her meaning and respond. In *English* English, being “knocked up” means “being awakened by a knock on the door.” In American English, being “knocked up” means “being pregnant.” Such expressions are called “idioms” or “idiomatic expressions,” particular phrasings and word usage by native speakers of a language. Even native English speakers can be confused by different idiomatic expressions used in various dialects, so consider the bafflement of someone just learning English! How would that make any sense—to talk about someone “being knocked up”? People unfamiliar with a language tend to take everything literally, so phrases like “being knocked up” or “hit the road” (i.e., inflict a blow on a public byway) make no sense. In order to fully comprehend a language, and get everything out of it—written or spoken—we really must know what native speakers of the language know. That, in the case of scripture and other ancient writings, however, can’t assure accurate translation because over time living languages are constantly changing, especially oral language. Here is one example: “I am the way, the truth and the life,” Jesus said. Nowadays, you will find people saying and writing: “I am the way, the truth and *the light*.” As Quakers, that’s okay with us, but this change seems to have come about through *mis-hearing* a verse frequently quoted aloud, but apparently not read.

So what happened to the Scriptures through the centuries as they were translated from one language to another? Some things are always lost in translation. Some concepts in one language cannot be expressed clearly or simply in another language. For instance, in Brazilian Portuguese, the word *saudades* has no good equivalent in English. “*Tenho saudades*” means “I miss it,” “I am nostalgic for it,” “I have a hole in my heart for it,” but even these don’t precisely

capture the feeling of *saudades*. Notice, too, how many words I have to use in English to try to express what one word expresses in Portuguese?

So we always lose something in translation, but I think we also *find* things in translation, because those translating choose words in their own language that reflect the degree of their understanding of the original language. If a person does not have native familiarity with a language, many subtleties may go missing or be changed. Let's think about the scriptures—the teachings of Jesus and commentaries from later writers—which have been translated through centuries of time and dozens of dialects. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic and, given his circumstances, was quite possibly illiterate. His words were translated into Greek at least fifty years after his death by people distant in time and place from him, people who would not have understood Aramaic idioms that he used. No doubt these translators included idioms of their own language as they tried to communicate certain concepts. The version of the Scriptures we read today, first translated from the Aramaic oral tradition into ancient Greek and then translated from ancient Greek into English, adds another layer of idiomatic expressions from English. (Those who prefer the eloquent King James Version add a further layer of Shakespearean English idioms which modern readers may not understand.)

I have often speculated on subtle changes in meaning a translation can make. For instance, the phrase “I am the way,” often quoted from the New Testament, in Greek is *ego eimi hodos*. What if it was an idiomatic expression in ancient Greek? Now, I know there are Greek scholars who surely would have figured this out by now, but *what if* we don't have access to something that would make clear this was an idiom. What if translating the phrase as “***Mine*** is the way, the truth and the life,” the phrase expresses more clearly what Jesus actually meant? Think of the difference it would make to have preachers thundering from the pulpit, “Jesus said, ‘*Mine* is the way, the truth and the life!’” Christians would be obliged to follow his *way*, not worship *him* as the only way. Think of the difference this would have made in the history of the past two thousand years.

I have been thinking about things lost and found in translation because of a book John Howland loaned me called *The Lost Sutras of Jesus*, which is about a version of the gospel brought to China by Persian (Iranian) Christians in 635 C.E., a group of monks who walked the Silk Road from Persia to China. According to the book, “The word ‘sutra,’ derived from a Sanskrit term for thread, is more than a brief aphoristic teaching. It is quite literally a thread—a way, a path to be followed.”¹ So these “Sutras of Jesus” refer to texts taken by early Christians to China that talk about ways or paths of Jesus, ways that he taught.

In the first chapter, the editors explain that these early Persian Christians were not dominated by the early church fathers and Roman Catholic teachings about Jesus, and indeed, they “believed Mary was the mother of Jesus the man, not the god. They were captivated by the historical Jesus and treated his teachings like those of a sage. The Jesus Sutras vary even more dramatically from Western Christianity,” warning about “the pitfalls of karma” and promoting “nonviolence toward all life forms.”² The editors ascribe these differences to something that happened to the early Christians on their way across the Silk Road from Persia to China, “something that transformed” them and “led them to ‘translate’ the documents they carried from Persia into a collection of ‘sutras’ that melded the teachings of Jesus with the beliefs of Buddha and Lao Tzu.”³ According to the editors, exposure to different beliefs encountered in their travels “altered their world view so dramatically that when they came to render the sacred texts into Chinese, they rewrote large sections, transforming Jesus into a wise leader who saved humanity not from sin but the wheel of reincarnation.”⁴

I disagree.

I believe that these Persian monks, who learned Chinese after they arrived in China and who no doubt consulted with their Chinese colleagues, translated the gospel text as they

¹ *The Lost Sutras of Jesus: Unlocking the Ancient Wisdom of the Xiam Monks*. Jon Babcock, Trans., Ray Riegert and Thomas Moore, Eds. (Berkeley, California: Seastone, 2003), page 132.

² Ibid. p. 13-4.

³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴ Ibid. p. 15.

understood it, with their limited Chinese, a language with unfamiliar idioms as well as concepts. Not being native speakers, they would not have been aware of idiomatic expressions used by the Chinese. When their Chinese colleagues read the translations, they would have changed things that sounded odd or made no sense. The same way, if I were translating the idiom “Hit the road,” I would change it to “Go away,” so that a non-native speaker would know what I really meant. But I think the changes in the translation came about because the Chinese language didn’t have a word for “sin,” it had a word for “karma,” which the translators were forced to use when they wanted to communicate the concept of “sin” or “missing the mark.” All this, of course, was re-translated centuries later from their second-language Chinese into modern English and thus includes the Chinese idioms for things now understood in Chinese terms.

Allow me to tell you a personal experience that leads me to this conclusion. This experience was for me an epiphany about language, about the way language works, the *way* language confuses us, and the way we misinterpret things, something I think has happened over and over again with the Scriptures.

In 1982 I was teaching a unit on the Japanese poetry form, haiku, in my Creative Writing class at Fort Collins High School in Colorado. Haiku has very particular rules: it must contain seventeen syllables (usually three lines of 5,7, 5); it must contain a word that by itself indicates season or time (like “cherry blossom” for spring); it must deal with a brief moment in nature, and it must *suggest* more than it says. While we were writing haiku in the class, the English department chair left a flyer about a national haiku-writing contest on my desk. Contestants were to submit three haiku, which would be judged by various national experts, and the prize was a two-weeks-all-expenses-paid trip to Japan for the student *and* his or her English teacher. Three of my students were interested in entering, including Anita Farrell, an excellent writer who had become fascinated with the haiku form. Here are two of her haiku:

You gnarled old man tree--
what wonderful songs you’d sing
if words were green leaves.

and

In the fishpond mirror
a sudden gold butterfly
ripples in reverse.

We sent off the entries and sure enough, a few months later, I received a call in the English department telling me that Anita had won!

That summer, along with four other American students and their English teachers, Anita and I traveled around Japan for two weeks. At every stop, we had discussions or conferences on haiku. Everyone in Japan, it seemed, wrote haiku from the emperor on down. One taxi driver told us he was a member of three haiku-writing societies. Television crews and newspaper reporters met us at every stop and they always asked for “new haiku,” assuming that these American kids (and their teachers, of course) were constantly writing haiku. The kids had all written haiku primarily for specific assignments and hadn’t written any more. Of the five teachers, only the man from Hawaii actually wrote haiku.

The amazement and consternation of our interviewers became apparent to me after a while. It was hard to miss because we were constantly being asked, “But *how* do you write haiku in English?” We had no answers, couldn’t really see the difficulty, but clearly they considered it near impossible.

Finally, feeling guilty for not writing haiku myself, I began taking notes for one based on my watching out the train window as we whizzed past perfect rows of tea bushes. My haiku in English was this:

Rows of tea bushes
Like soldier caterpillars
Quietly climb.

As we continued to encounter questions about writing haiku in English, I decided to try to write this in Japanese (not in characters, but oral Japanese) just to see how different it might be. I had read a good deal about haiku and learned a few phrases in Japanese before the trip, and I

had a good little English / Japanese dictionary. I knew too that in Japanese, every consonant sound must have an accompanying vowel sound, as in “*to-yo-ta*.” I looked up the various nouns—“tea bushes,” “caterpillar,” “soldier,” and connecting words. I put it together and asked our Japanese guide, Chrissie, to read it over for me for grammatical errors. She did, making only one minor correction.

Chabatake-ni
O samurai kemushi
shizukani noburu

A few days later, we attended a seminar on haiku at the mayor’s office in Osaka where we were also given a key to the city. Present were about fifteen Japanese men recognized as experts in haiku—university professors, a professional poet, etc. There were only three women present—another American English teacher, our Japanese guide, Chrissie, and me. I listened as again the Japanese expressed wonder and puzzlement at the writing of haiku in English. Finally, Professor Yoshida, speaking through a translator, said what they all were apparently thinking but too polite to say. “Americans cannot write haiku,” he declared. “The American culture is young and undeveloped; you cannot understand haiku. Americans don’t have the subtlety; they like gimmicks and tricks in their writing.” He then criticized Anita’s poem for its use of the word “gold” to describe a butterfly (“In the fishpond mirror / a sudden gold butterfly / ripples in reverse.”) As he talked, I realized that whoever had translated the poem had translated the word as *gold the metal* instead of a yellow color. So quite rightly, he was criticizing the unnaturalness of a metal butterfly! Clearly, Professor Yoshida’s bluntness made many of the Japanese uncomfortable, but I appreciated his honesty because it helped me to understand the problem.

Later, we American teachers were again asked if we had any haiku we would share with them. The man from Hawaii stood and read several he had written but no one else volunteered.

Chrissie nudged me and whispered, “Read the haiku you wrote in Japanese. It’s good.” With that encouragement, I stood and read aloud my haiku.

When I finished, there was silence, then hurried whispering and counting of syllables, and then one of the men stood to announce we would take a fifteen-minute break.

When the group re-convened, a man stood and addressed me in halting English. “Professor SoandSo.... wish me say to you, you write very good haiku.” There followed some discussion of my haiku, along with a suggestion for revision from Professor Yoshida that I get rid of *samurai* and use instead *to-hikari*. All of this went past me, but I nodded and took notes. After the meeting, Professor Yoshida stood and handed me his business card, a sign of respect in Japan.

For the rest of the day, I floated and gloated (internally, of course) over my little triumph. Only late that night as I lay in bed, replaying the tape of my stunning success did it occur to me that—Omigosh!—the haiku I wrote was *not* the haiku they heard. Although I had managed to use the proper number of syllables, I wrote an *American* haiku—nothing small about it, but *huge rows* of tea bushes, and I used simile—they were marching over hills *like* caterpillars or soldiers in ranks (metaphor & simile probably qualify as “tricks” with language). Suddenly I understood that, because Japanese has no marker for singular or plural except context, they had heard the haiku this way:

In the tea plantation
a soldier caterpillar
quietly climbs.

This is a much better poem! *Much* better.

Professor Yoshida’s suggestion that I use “to-hikari,” which means “glittering sword,” helped me realize he and the other Japanese were picturing a single horned caterpillar climbing a tea bush.

I cannot tell you how abashed and humbled I felt, and how *glad* that no one else knew. Glad, too, that the poem was probably being translated by native Japanese speakers as a proper haiku—a brief snapshot dealing with a moment in nature, suggesting more than it says.

So more may be *found* in translation than is lost—that is, we *find* in a translation what makes sense to us. This is true of the Christian scriptures, so often translated, so often changed to make sense to the time, place, language and culture of the translator. If we consider a text seriously and sincerely seek its meaning, it will speak to us, though it might not say what the original writer intended. (Occasionally, as I discovered in Japan, a misunderstanding may actually result in something better than the original!)

But here is the marvel of it all. In spite of this, the Scriptures *do* still speak to us. And certain truths rise up from them, time and time again, in every language—“Be compassionate,” “love one another,” “love the earth,” “love the Creator.” No matter the translation, those truths remain.