

Translation and the Gospel of Mark

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1. How I came to translate religious texts

When I arrived in Brussels equipped with language diplomas from Paris and Oxford Universities, I took up a post training translators and interpreters at the Institut Supérieur de l'État pour Traducteurs et Interprètes. After seventeen years of what proved to be a very positive experience, I decided to leave my job and turn to theological studies; first, at a distance, with London University, then at theological institutions in Brussels. These studies involved the acquirement of Hebrew and first century Greek. I was delighted with my studies, but where was this zigzag path leading me? One day the light dawned and I decided I would attempt to translate — re-translate, of course — that fascinating book commonly known as The Book of Genesis. After nine years of painstaking research, *At the start... Genesis made new. A translation of the Hebrew text* was published, first by a poetry centre in Louvain, Belgium, in 1992, and then by Doubleday, NY, in 1993.

Crazy, but it gets crazier. Instead of moving on to the second book of the Bible, I had an irresistible urge to tackle the Gospel of Mark. Of the four canonical gospels, this one is my favourite. During my studies, it had received special attention from Reverend Jean Mouson, a remarkable exegete, whose courses I had followed in Brussels. My Greek was judged worthy of an A+ by King's College, London. So, all in all, the green light was on and I decided to plunge ahead!

My version of Mark's Gospel is now published. I hope it will be welcomed as a new, dynamic, contemporary space that can inspire actors, artists, linguists, psycho-therapists, students of the Scriptures... as well as the general reader interested in those roots of our culture which are linked to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

To my great joy, the celebrated Russian artist Irina Zatulovskaya offered to join in on the project. Her images accompany the text in the published version. Her artistic work is another form of translation/interpretation. The turquoise of the cover expresses joy and hope. Inside the book, different shades of brown evoke the meetings, stories and works of Jeshua. Brown turns to black, expressing the betrayal of friendship, suffering and abandonment. The final image, in red, evokes the triumph of Life over Death.

2. The principles guiding my translation

There are many ways of translating a Bible text: the beautiful seventeenth century prose versions represent one way. Another way, in keeping with modern translational trends, seeks to convey a sense of authenticity to today's reader by capturing the peculiar characteristics of the original. Following the latter path, my purpose is to build a bridge between the old and the new, between past history and our fast-changing, modern world.

To achieve the above, I adopt a 'word for word' — some say a 'concordance' — method of translation. This means that each word of the source text is systematically translated by a corresponding word in the target language. One consequence of this method is that each word repeated in the source text is repeated in translation.

To ensure exactness, a great deal of spadework must be done at the semantic level to determine which English word can systematically correspond to a given Hebrew or Greek word. Lexicon, concordance, thesaurus and dictionary are helpful tools for semantic research. I scrutinise the solutions they propose. I also look at choices made by other Bible translators. Finally, I check all the biblical contexts in which a given word occurs before making a final choice. This research provides the raw material for my translation. The result may be considered poetic rather than didactic, yet it is also significant for exegetical studies.

Further decisions, which are not directly related to vocabulary, must also be taken. For instance, are proper names to be translated or transliterated? How are Greek tenses and aspects of the verbs best rendered in English? What is the most suitable lay-out for the translated text? How is it to be punctuated? Although my purpose is to narrow the gap between the Greek and English texts, I avoid Greek borrowings and also exclude the use of neologisms. The English I use is correct, if not exactly current. Moreover, inspired by the desire to modernise, the new version makes a deliberate attempt to update the vocabulary of the gospel. Here are a few examples with their current translations: 'riddle' for 'parable'; 'secret' for 'mystery'; 'trust' for 'faith'; 'change' for 'conversion'. I also prefer 'put him on the cross' to 'crucify': it has a beat that is easily picked up by a crowd....

3. The new translation

The new translation is based on the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, which is standard in academia. The texts of the New Testament have, of course, been translated and re-translated over the centuries. Can I still hope to do something different? One thing works in my favour: much loved translations such as The Revised Standard Version (RSV) have acquired a sacred character with the result that translators in this field tend to be conservative; they do not look for novelty.

I started out on my task by working on the vocabulary (see Word patterns below), while at the same time taking into account formal aspects of the text: a new format reflects the word order and rhythms of the Greek. When the body of the translation was ready, I felt able to take several bold decisions. The first innovation concerns the title. The source text, the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, proposes *Kata Markon*, literally 'According to Mark'. Here I follow traditional English versions but with a difference. The name 'Mark' distinguishes this gospel from the other three, so the title includes 'Mark' but not the usual 'gospel' or 'good news'. I take 'glad', as in 'glad tidings', and end up with *Glad News from Mark*. (For information, the names 'Matthew', 'Mark', 'Luke' and 'John' were attributed to the gospel texts as late as the second century C.E. They came to stay.)

Another important option concerns the name of the central figure. In English versions he is generally known as Jesus. 'Jesus' is a transcription of the Greek, whereas the original Hebrew name is Jeshua. 'Jeshua', meaning 'God will save', is the name his father gave him (Mt 1,25). In translation, I prefer to reject the over-burdened, not to say hackneyed, name 'Jesus', and write 'Jeshua' instead.

4. The format of the new version

The translation entitled *Glad News from Mark: A translation of the Greek text* intends to be as close to the original Greek as correct modern English allows. It brings out the remoteness of the ethos of first-century Palestine for contemporary readership. The translated text is presented with a new layout. A free verse form reflects the spoken rhythms of the source text, which was initially recited, read aloud, listened to. The line division corresponds to consecutive units of meaning and, by the way, does away with the need to translate the often repeated *kai* [and],

which is current in the source text and is even found at the beginning of new sentences. The free verse form and the sparing use of *kai* lighten the text and make for an easy read as the eye travels down the page.

Following some modern writers, I also sometimes drop the subject pronoun and write 'said', for instance, rather than 'he said'. One word in place of two speeds up the read and underscores the lively style of the original. It also corresponds to the Greek, where pronoun and verb form a single word.

Punctuation is generally omitted. The absence of punctuation links up with the old and the new: punctuation as we know it was unknown to the ancients. In the present version, however, I take the liberty of inserting exclamation marks for purposes of clarification or to enhance dramatic effect.

Finally, to allow the reader to perceive the gospel as a complete work of dramatic intensity, the translation is presented without those titles, subtitles or footnotes which have been added with time for the reader's guidance but which are not found in the original text. However, divisions into chapter and verse, which are also subsequent additions, are maintained to facilitate consultation or comparison with other versions.

5. Word patterns

A basic aspect of the new version concerns the rendering of Greek vocabulary in English. With the help of *A Concordance to the Greek Testament* (1989), it is possible to study a particular Greek word in all its contexts and choose what appears to be the best possible rendering in English. This research provides the raw material for my translation. To illustrate, in chapter six, seven Greek words are used of John the dipper. They appear in the English text as follows: 'he is awakened' (Mark 6,16); 'take hold' (6,17); 'bound' (6,17); 'kill' (6,19); 'opportunity' (6,21); 'corpse' (6,29); 'a grave' (6,29). In later chapters, the same Greek words re-occur with reference to Jeshua, and exactly the same English words are chosen to translate them: 'he is awakened' (16, 6); 'take hold' (14, 44); 'bound' (15,1); 'kill' (14,1); 'opportunity' (14,11); 'corpse' (15,45); 'a grave' (15,46). It is suggested that the repetition of words here represents a gain: it underscores what is common to John and Jeshua, pointing, at a semantic level, to Mark's presentation of John as Jeshua's precursor.

By way of comparison, the RSV reads 'he has been raised' (6,16) and 'he has risen' (16,6). Two verbs, 'raise' and 'rise', and two moods, the passive and the active, establish a difference between John and Jeshua which I do not find in the source text.

6. The young man (14,51-52) and the linen cloth

I would now like to focus on a particular passage in the Gospel of Mark: chapter 14,51-52, which tells of the mysterious appearance of a young man on the plot of land known as Gethsemane. The word *neaniskos* [the young man] occurs only twice in the Gospel of Mark, in the passage just quoted and again in 16,5.

Scholars have long puzzled over the identity of this young man. In his analysis of the last chapters of Mark's gospel (14,15 to 15,46), Rowan Williams (Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, UK), however, simply chooses to ignore him, feeling perhaps that he does not fit in the movement of pilgrims that Williams so brilliantly evokes in his book *Meeting God in Mark*. Another Bible commentator, John S. McKinnon, in *Together in Galilee: a pastoral commentary on the Gospel according to Mark*, writes that some scholars assume the young man to be "a personal reference to Mark himself (making a personal appearance, as it were, in his narrative)", or that this is possibly an evocation of "a young man at the time, curious to

follow a posse of temple troops [...] marching through the city". McKinnon further links this young man with another young man who appears in the empty tomb (see below). The French Traduction œcuménique de la Bible notes that he is perhaps the image of the faithful disciple who tries to follow his Master. More interestingly, the Belgian exegete and contemporary lecturer Jean Radermakers S.J. proposes different hypotheses (see his publication "La Bonne Nouvelle de Jésus selon saint Marc"). As does McKinnon, Radermakers suggests a possible link between this young man and the young man who, we are told, is present in the tomb. This hypothesis is pursued below.

The Greek word *sindon* [a linen cloth] occurs four times in the Gospel of Mark, twice in verses 14,51-52 and twice again in verse 15,46:

A young man followed him
 wrapped in a linen cloth over his naked body
 They took hold of him
 But he left the linen cloth behind
 and naked fled (MPK 14,51-52)

He (Joseph) bought a linen cloth
 lifted him (Jeshua) down
 swathed him in the linen cloth
 and put him in a tomb hewn out of the rock
 Then he rolled a stone up against the door of the grave (15,46)

As there is no mention of a 'linen cloth' elsewhere in the gospel, the double mention in each of these two passages creates a striking cross-connection between the episode of the young man and the burial of Jeshua. The episode of the young man is indeed puzzling. Who is he? Why, in two brief verses, is attention drawn to his unconventional attire, to his naked body and the 'linen cloth' that covers it? As suggested above, this passage has long remained an enigma. When connected with verse 15,46, however, the 'linen cloth' acquires special significance. Following in the direction pointed out by Radermakers and McKinnon in their respective studies (see works quoted above), in verse 15,46 the 'linen cloth' is used to swathe Jeshua's corpse: it suggests preparation for burial. A major point: in the light of the link established between the young man and Jeshua, the young man's abandonment of the 'linen cloth' and his flight foreshadow Jeshua's ultimate escape from the grave. In summary, thanks to a word link, the episode of the young man and the story of Jeshua are seen to be mutually enlightening. Remembering that no manifestations of a risen Christ are recorded in Mark's gospel (appendix excluded), I suggest that this esoteric evocation is particularly significant.

I note, in passing, that the RSV and The New English Bible (NEB) do not transmit the repetition of the same Greek word in the two verses quoted. Here are the two verses, as rendered in the RSV:

And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked (RSV 14,51-52)

And he bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb (RSV 15,46)

The RSV translators devote their attention to what the text means rather than to what the text literally says. The 'linen cloth' of the young man in the Garden of Gethsemane becomes

a 'linen shroud' when associated with burial. The same can be said of the NEB translation. I quote:

Among those following was a young man with nothing on but a linen cloth. They tried to seize him; but he slipped out of the linen cloth and ran away naked (NEB 14,51-52)

So Joseph bought a linen sheet, took him down from the cross, and wrapped him in the sheet, Then he laid him in a tomb cut out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the entrance (15,46)

In the NEB translation, the 'linen cloth' of the first verse becomes a 'linen sheet', and then a 'sheet' in the second verse. In both cases, the word link is lost in translation.

We return to *neaniskos* [the young man]. This word is found the second time in verse 16,5:

The sabbath over
 Mary the Magdalene, Mary mother of James
 and Salome
 buy spices
 to come and anoint him
 Very early in the morning
 on the one of the week
 they come to the grave
 as the sun springs up
 They were saying to one another
 Who will roll away the stone for us
 from the door of the grave?
 They look up
 and perceive that the stone has been rolled aside
 Yes, it was very great!
 They go into the grave
 They see a young man sitting on the right,
 wrapped in a white robe (MPK 16,1-5)

The identity of this young man is as mysterious as that of the young man in the Garden of Gethsemane. Who is he? His "white robe" suggests a celestial figure. Further, one is tempted to ask, why is the position of the young man referred to? He is said to be "sitting on the right". It is significant to note that this latter phrase is found again in verse 14,62. I quote:

Jeshua says, I AM
 And you will see the son-of-mankind
 sitting on the right of the power
 and coming with the clouds of the sky (MPK 14,62)

With the expression "sitting on the right of the power (of God)" Jeshua asserts his divine nature. Not only is he sitting on God's right, but he also uses the phrase I AM. Now, in Exodus 3,14, the divine name is revealed to Moses as I AM. Jeshua's double claim to divinity is clear to the High Priest, who reacts by tearing his garments, a traditional way of expressing horror. For this 'blasphemy' Jeshua is condemned to death.

By way of comparison, for an identical phrase in Greek the RSV has two different phrases: "on the right side" (RSV, 16,5) and "at the right hand" (14,62). The NEB also has two different phrases: "on the right-hand side" (NEB 16, 5) and "at the right hand" (14,62). Furthermore,

both the RSV and the NEB simply translate “I am”. In this way, Jeshua is understood to answer the query of the High Priest “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” without claiming the divine name, I AM. Different translators, different choices!

I do not wish to end this article without a special mention of Sœur Jeanne d’Arc, O.P. (Order of Preachers), another woman translator. In 1971, Sœur Jeanne d’Arc personally presented her *Concordance du Nouveau Testament* to the then pope, Paul VI. Her translation of the four Greek gospels into French was completed in 1991. I was privileged to meet her when, towards the end of a full, rich life, she lay paralysed in her bed. Below is her translation of Mark 14,62:

Jésus dit :

« Je suis.

Et vous verrez le fils de l’homme

assis à droite de la Puissance,

venir avec les nuées du ciel ! » (Sr Jeanne d’Arc Mark 14, 62)

7. References

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Biography: Yorkshire-born, Mary Phil Korsak (née Malone) is a philologist, translator and Bible scholar. Studies at Paris and Oxford Universities led to a teaching career at The Institut Supérieur de Traducteurs et Interprètes in Brussels, and at the European Commission. She addressed many international meetings: the Society of Biblical Literature, Women in Theology, meetings for translators, literature festivals in Europe and the USA, and spoke on Australian radio. Mary Phil and her husband live in Brussels. They have four sons and two daughters. Her website can be found at www.maryphilkorsak.com



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