

PENTECOST: IN FAITH WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

**Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)
October 21, 2007**

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14—4:5

Luke 18:1-8

Culture, Translation, and Faith

When my wife Mary and I moved to Manhattan from the Ozark foothills of southwest Missouri, we had to learn many new cultural and linguistic lessons. For example, we found out that there are unwritten rules about riding elevators: you look at the floor, you don't speak, and you turn to face the door after entering. We also learned that ordering a cup of coffee took a special kind of language. In the Ozarks, when you order coffee you get a cup of black coffee with a supply of cream or milk; in Manhattan when you order coffee you get a cup of coffee with the cream or milk already stirred in unless you specifically tell the server something like "Coffee with no room," which translated means something like "fill the cup to the top and leave no room for milk."

Moving from the Ozarks to New York City is a case of cultural and linguistic shifts--even though we are still residents in the USA, still living in the same time period, and still speaking the same mother tongue. Unwritten rules and linguistic shifts are just part of what it means to move from one culture to another. Imagine what it would mean to move yourself and your family from living in Bible times and speaking in Bible languages to living in a modern culture and speaking a modern language.

Yet, this is exactly what Bible translators must do when they translate a biblical text from ancient Greek and Hebrew into, say, modern English or Gullah. They literally move the people and stories of the Bible forward in time over 2000 years, into a new cultural setting like the USA, and into a new language such as English. Two of our readings for this week show examples of this cultural shift that takes place in translation. And one of them assures us that no matter how big the cultural shift from Bible times to modern times, translators are up to the task of making the Word of God as understandable and engaging today as it was 2,000 years ago. This important text tells us that Holy Scriptures, even in modern translation, are still "inspired by God and useful for teaching" (2 Timothy 3:16, *NRSV*).

The first passage, Genesis 32:22-31, tells the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel. This text translates a beloved story, but one whose cultural values and mores seem very strange to us today. It takes us back to the time of the early patriarchs of Israel, about the 14th century B.C. This is a time and place when it was considered normal to have multiple wives and concubines or secondary wives. Thus, in the passage, Jacob has two



wives and two concubines. Today, Christians and Jews no longer accept multiple wives and concubines. Still, a translator must not omit or change this text. It is the Word of God and describes a family structure that was normal in Bible times but not today.

Secondly, consider Luke 18:1-8, the story of a widow and judge. Ancient legal practice allowed for this kind of informal conversation between a judge and a litigant. But modern legal systems do not.

The world has changed since Bible times. But God's Word has not. How do we as Christians work with this tension inherent in the Holy Scriptures, as we try to engage the Bible and enrich our lives and spirits? One thing to keep in mind is that sometimes the Bible describes, sometimes it prescribes. The Bible describes when it depicts cultural and historical elements that may have changed or been discarded, for example, holy war, blood revenge, polygamy, and concubinage. We are not expected to treat these descriptions as timeless truths. They are simply the local and cultural conditions that accompanied God's revelation.

The Bible prescribes when it opens our hearts and minds to the timeless truths and infinite wisdom of a God whose love for us grew so deep that he gave his only begotten Son as a sacrifice for our sins. The Bible stories for today prescribe a truth about God who meets us even in strange places and will do anything to get our attention, including wrestling with us. The Bible prescribes when it allows us to exhibit the complete trust that God wants us to place in divine care and love, even when enemies threaten to overwhelm us. The Bible prescribes when it urges us to knock on God's door until God finally answers.

Yes, the Bible is an old book from a time and place that have long since disappeared. But the Bible is also a timeless book, inspired, relevant, and as engaging today as it was more than 2,000 years ago.

This week's Reflection was prepared by Robert Hodgson, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Dean of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the Bible Societies in: Germany – With prayers for the “Expedition Planet B” campaign that is designed to encourage children to read the Bible; **Belgium (Flemish)** – With thanks to God for the new interactive Bible Museum in Bruges which opened last November in partnership with the Roman Catholic diocese of Bruges, and with prayers that the museum and a new mobile Bible exhibition featuring European paintings that portray Bible stories and characters will challenge visitors to think about the Bible and its message; **Belgium (Francophone)** – With thanks to God for the Bible Exhibition held during the European Catholic Conference, and with prayers for current projects such as School Bibles, Youth Bibles, and for Scriptures placed in public libraries and secular bookshops, and with prayers for the staff serving in Luxembourg.



Activity Corner: A Translation Challenge

Supplies needed: Bible, pen/pencil and paper

Ancient biblical manuscripts were written with no spaces in between the words and no punctuation marks. Hebrew texts contained no vowels, and Greek texts were written in all capital letters. See if you and members of your household can “translate” the following text (hint: it’s from a psalm in the *King James Version*):

IWILLLIFTUPMINEEYESUNTOTHEHILLSFROMWHENCECOMETHMYHELPMY
HELPCOMETHFROMTHELORDWHICHMADEHEAVENANDEARTHHEWILL
NOTSUFFERTHYFOOTTOBEMOVEDHETHATKEEPETHTHEEWILLNOTSLUMB
ERBEHOLDHETHATKEEPETHISRAELSHALLNEITHERSLUMBERNORSLEEP
THELORDISTHYKEEPERTHELORDISTHYSHADEUPONTHYRIGHTHANDTHE
SUNSHALLNOTSMIGHTTHEEBYDAYNORTHEMOONBYNIGHTTHELORD
SHALLPRESERVETHEEFROMALLEVILHESHALLPRESERVETHYSOULTHE
LORDSHALLPRESERVETHYGOINGOUTANDTHYCOMINGINFROMTHISTIME
FORTHANDEVENFOREVERMORE

Once the text has been translated, conclude by reading it together.

