



Quaker Universalist Voice

Notes on Genesis 1–3 Translation

by J.M. Spears

- “I’ve heard it claimed several times (originally by some of the prepared childbirth people, I think) that the word “pain” in Genesis 3:16 is not an accurate translation - that word used is the same as the one translated as “hard work” for the man. Would you comment on that? Thanks for your work. (Wisconsin)
- I thought that your translation would do something with Genesis 3:16, why doesn’t it?” (California)

Response: It would be wonderful if I could have a record of all my thoughts when I translate. Then, I could say why this translation of Genesis 3:16 turned out just as it did. The word is the same Hebrew word in 3:16 and 17. One Hebrew lexicon (dictionary) uses the word for “hardship,” “pain,” and “distress” for the basic meanings of the Hebrew word. Another lexicon uses the word to mean “to travail,” “suffer pain,” “sorrow” and “toil” as meanings for the verb form of the Hebrew word.

In the book, P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, the author concludes, after extensive discussion of Genesis 3:16, that the phrase means ‘pain in childbirth. (p. 127). She translates 3:17b as “In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life,” but, in discussing 3:17b, she says, “In toil, he shall eat of the earth all the days of his life.” (p. 130).

To show the connectedness of the two “punishments,” I chose the word “trouble” for both women and the earthling. I chose the word “trouble” because younger children understand the idea of trouble. Pain in eating is not an accurate concept, but could be the misunderstanding a small child would have if the word “pain” had been used the translation should not convey to a child the idea that raising food (gardening) is painful. The pain comes from the curse on the earth, which affects the earthling and was caused by the earthling.

This is an example of how the Hebrew language, which has a very limited vocabulary, is able to pack such subtle meaning into just a few words. Unlike Hebrew, English has many words, each one conveying very specific meanings, thereby making hard choices for the translator.

The job of the translator is to be as accurate as possible in stating, in a second language, the ideas the original authors stated in the first language. In these translations, I have determined that the translation should be done in such a way that children are pointed toward the truth as the original authors experienced and then expressed it.

A translator is always fighting against the temptation to make the Bible say what the translator wants to say. It is easy to fail in this task. That is the reason it is good to have committees of translators representing a wide variety of views working together in the translation process.