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CITIES, TOWNS, AND VILLAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The October 1979 issue of *The Bible Translator: Practical Papers* (434-8) published a useful article by Euan Fry entitled "Cities, Towns and Villages in the Old Testament." Nearly thirty years later may be a good time for a complementary article on the New Testament.

Euan Fry's main points were (1) that "the important thing about the Hebrew *'îr* was not the size of the settlement but the fact that it was protected by a wall and strong gates"; and (2) in translation "[w]e must also have an understanding of the situation of the people we are translating for." The second point is equally valid for the New Testament. The situation regarding the first point is rather different.

According to Louw and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (UBS 1988, vol. 1, sections 1.88-89) there are two main words for population centres: *polis* "city, town" and *kōmē* "village." In having only two such terms in common use, NT Greek is like most languages. English is unusual in having three: two of them, "city" and "village," coming from Latin, and "town" having a Germanic root. (French also has three, but its "cité" does not simply correspond to "city"; the standard *Robert* dictionary defines it in rather specialised ways, for example as an "important town, considered specially under its aspect as a moral person.")

This brief article will pay special attention to the problem of translating such expressions into English. This may seem arbitrary, or even self-centred, for someone whose mother tongue is English. We do so because the problem has wider implications, not only for other languages, but for other groups of words than those discussed in this article; for example, "sea" (*thalassa*) and "lake" (*limnē*).

In the New Testament, each of the following places is identified as a *polis*: in alphabetical order, Arimathea (Luke 23.51), the symbolic Babylon (Rev 18.10, 21), Bethlehem (Luke 2.4b), Bethsaida (Luke 9.10; John 1.44), Capernaum (Luke 4.31), Damascus (2 Cor 11.32), Ephesus (Acts 19.35), Ephraim (John 11.54), the new Jerusalem (Rev 3.12; 21.2,10), Joppa (Acts 11.5), Lasea (Acts 27.8), Nain (Luke 7.11), Nazareth (Matt 2.23; Luke 1.26; 2.4a,39), Rome (by implication, Acts 21.39), Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Pet 2.6), Sychar (John 4.5), and Thyatira (Acts 16.14). *Kōmē* is used much less frequently, of Bethany in John 11.1; of Bethlehem, which Luke calls a *polis*, in John 7.42; and of Bethsaida, which Luke and John call a *polis*, in Mark 8.23, 26. (In Luke 9.52, the weight of evidence supports *kōmēn*, but some witnesses have *polin*.) Mark 1.38 has a combination of the two terms, *kōmopoleis*, a word found only here in the Greek Bible, in a context which one is tempted to translate, "Let us go to the other towns/villages."

To sum up so far, it would seem likely, first, that in the usage of the various NT writings, *polis* covers a wider range than *kōmē*; and second, that NT usage is not entirely consistent.

A personal illustration will demonstrate that the second of these points, inconsistency in usage, is not confined to the ancient world. The place in England called Paulton in which I spent most of my second decade had a population of two to three thousand. Quite exceptionally, during an election campaign, a candidate referred to it to our astonishment as "this town." Its population has now grown to about seven thousand, but *Wikipedia* still refers to it as "a large village."

Other criteria, in different cultures, may affect or determine usage. St. David's in West Wales is about a quarter the size of my home village, but it is doubly qualified to be called a city, first because it has had a cathedral for over 800 years, and second because Queen Elizabeth II proclaimed it a city in 1995.

In general terms, therefore, *The American Heritage Dictionary*'s definition of a town as "a population center, often incorporated, larger than a village and usually smaller than a city," may hold good, but a number of factors may modify it, even in the usage of English-speaking countries, and certainly in other societies. Area and size of population are important but not decisive criteria.

To return to the New Testament, estimates have been made of the population of large centres such as Rome and Jerusalem, which native speakers of English would not hesitate to call cities. But the population of smaller centres is largely unknown to us, and in some cases probably to the NT writers themselves. Lasea (Acts 27.8), not mentioned by any ancient writer outside the New Testament, was apparently so obscure that the spelling of its name, in NT manuscripts and elsewhere, is uncertain; so to call it a city, as is done by many translations and works of reference, goes against normal English usage.

The translation of *polis* is thus a test of translation principles. Formal correspondence translations into English will tend to use "city" uniformly, especially for a centre of population known to have been called a *polis* in ancient literature outside the New Testament. (Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman *poleis* tended to be similar in construction and constitution. See D. F. Watson, "Cities, Greco-Roman," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, editors, *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Downers Grove, Illinois and Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press 2000, 212-5.) Translation teams aiming at functional equivalence will need to assess each occurrence of *polis* and *kōmē* on the basis of well-defined principles, aiming above all for consistent respect for the usage of the receptor or target language.

As an example of a fairly strict formal correspondence translation one may take the Revised Standard Version (RSV, NT 1946). Some relaxation of formal correspondence may be expected in its successor, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989). Formal correspondence, in this case the translation of *polis* by "city" and *kōmē* by "village," is indeed what one generally finds in RSV. There are, however, two unexplained exceptions: in Luke 23.50 (transposed by an untypical piece of restructuring from v. 51), RSV speaks of "the Jewish

town of Arimathea," and in John 11.54 of "a town called Ephraim." NRSV uses "town" rather more freely, not only of Arimathea and Ephraim, but also of Nain (Luke 7.11) and Nazareth (Matt 2.23; Luke 1.26; 2.4a, 39). It is not clear why, in the same verse (Luke 2.4), Nazareth should be called a town and Bethlehem a city; possibly for stylistic variation, or perhaps because "city of David" was felt to be a set phrase.

Turning to a functional correspondence translation such as the Good News Bible (GNB, also known as the Good News Translation), one expects to find more flexibility in the use of "city," "town," and "village." One is not disappointed, but there are some surprises too. Arimathea, Bethlehem, Bethsaida (in Luke 9.10; John 1.44), Capernaum, Ephraim, Lasea, Nain, Nazareth, and Sychar are called towns (*poleōs* in Acts 16.14, referring to Thyatira, is not translated). Babylon, Damascus, Ephesus, Jerusalem, Joppa, Rome, Sodom, and Gomorrah are called cities. The translators have clearly considered for each case the probable importance of the place in question. More surprising, perhaps, is the decision to translate *kōmē* as "town" in the case of Bethlehem and Bethsaida, though Bethany is called a village. Possibly one may see here the faintly negative connotation of "village" in American usage (apart from a set phrase such as "Greenwich Village"). To return to the illustration of Paulton, it is unlikely that a similar American centre of population with around 7,000 inhabitants would be called anything but a town. The GNB translators appear again to have shown sensitivity to the usage of their intended receptors, or at least the majority of them.

It is interesting to compare these results with those in Italian, a language whose linguistic mapping is probably closer than English to that of NT Greek. It has two main terms for centres of population, *città* (city, town) and *villaggio* (village); other terms, such as *cittadina* (small town, diminutive of *città*) and *paese* (country, village) are also available. In the Italian common language translation *Parola del Signore* (2nd edition 2001), *polis* is most commonly translated as *città*, as one would expect, but Nazareth (except in Luke 2.4a, where *polis* is not translated) is called a *villaggio*, as is Nain. Bethsaida is translated *villaggio* in Luke 9.10, but *città* in John 1.44. In Mark 8.23, 26, where the same place is called a *kōmē*, it is a *villaggio* in v. 23 but a *paese* in v. 26, perhaps for the sake of variety. In Luke 23.51 the name of Arimathea, and in John 11.1 that of Bethany, are given without calling them either *città* or *villaggi*: a legitimate option for translators if their intended receptors may be expected to know that these are names of places.

We end by reaffirming the conclusion Euan Fry reached in 1979. The names for centres of population need to be carefully analyzed into their semantic components, to see how far they correspond to those of possible translation equivalents. For example, the main distinguishing feature of a Hebrew *'îr* was its defensive fortifications, which were also a feature of Greco-Roman cities; but only in rare contexts is that likely to be the case for a contemporary town or city. If, for present-day receptors, the main distinguishing feature is size and/or population, translators may have to do research into the likely importance of places mentioned in the New Testament. Sometimes, they may be reduced to

making a (more or less) educated guess. The task is likely to be more complicated in the case of languages which, unlike NT Greek, have more than two commonly used terms to denote population centres, but it cannot be avoided, and the result is likely to vary from one target language to another. In any case, the examples we have cited show how difficult it is to achieve the right kind of sensitive consistency appropriate to a functional equivalent translation; but it is a goal worth striving for.

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WHERE IS THE WEALTHY LADY OF SHUNEM IN 2 KINGS 4.11-17?

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When I recently edited the Handbook on 1-2 Kings by Roger Omanson and John Ellington, I was intrigued by an exegetical problem in 2 Kgs 4.11-17. This passage presents the inciting incident in the story of Elisha and the wealthy lady of Shunem (2 Kgs 4.8-37). In this scene it appears that Elisha calls the Shunammite woman twice and she comes each time in response. But how can she be called and respond twice in the same scene? To understand the nature of this problem, look at the RSV rendering here:

> [11]One day he came there, and he turned into the chamber and rested there. [12]And he said to Gehazi his servant, "Call this Shunammite." When he had called her, she stood before him. [13]And he said to him, "Say now to her, See, you have taken all this trouble for us; what is to be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?" She answered, "I dwell among my own people." [14]And he said, "What then is to be done for her?" Gehazi answered, "Well, she has no son, and her husband is old." [15]He said, "Call her." And when he had called her, she stood in the doorway. [16]And he said, "At this season when the time comes round, you shall embrace a son." And she said, "No, my lord, O man of God; do not lie to your maidservant." [17]But the woman conceived, and she bore a son about that time the following spring, as Elisha had said to her.

Notice that the woman receives her first call from Elisha in v. 12 and she responds by standing in front of him. Then in v. 15 she receives another call and responds by appearing at the doorway of Elisha's room. This is confusing, so John Gray (493) recommends the following: "Since these words [at the end of v. 12] interrupt the instructions of Elisha to Gehazi, and are in any case repeated in sense at v. 15, they should be omitted in v. 12." In his translation of this passage he keeps these words, but places them in parentheses. Burke Long (55) also recognizes a problem here, but he advises that these words be kept since he believes the author uses them to bracket the dialogue in vv. 13-14. For Long they are simply a rhetorical device, but he admits that the woman probably moved a little closer to Elisha the second time he called her.