

“Translating the Letter”

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If a dear friend of yours in India had sent you a letter containing his last wishes and a special message of love, would you not prize that letter very highly? There is no doubt but that you would read it very often, until you were able to tell all its contents without reference to the written page. And yet, although you might become so familiar with its contents, you would still frequently turn to the letter, and read it again and again.

Would it make any difference to you if you knew that the letter was not written with his own hand, but that it was dictated to an amanuensis? [amanuensis means someone who assists by taking dictation or copying manuscripts] The fact that it was from your friend would be the great thing; you would not mind if he had used the hand of another to transcribe the thoughts. And you would not need to depend on the signature in his own handwriting, to know that the letter was indeed from your friend. The tone and spirit of the letter, and the messages sent, which show more plainly than the signature, that it was from him. Somebody else might forge his signature, but nobody could counterfeit his sentiments and spirit, nor could the love that is breathed through the messages be counterfeited.

But suppose that the letter is written in Hindustani; what would you do then? You cannot read a word of that language, and how can you know that the letter is

from your friend, and what it contains? Would you give the matter up, and say that you cannot be expected to know the contents of a letter written in a foreign language? Not by any means. You would straightway seek a man who is acquainted with both the English and the Hindustani, and get him to translate the letter for you. Then you could read it as readily as though it had been originally written in English. And you would be able to tell that it was from your friend, just the same as before. You would recognize his style of thought and expression, and would know that the messages of love or even of a business nature, could come from no stranger. The fact that the letter was written in Hindustani would not make a particle of difference. You could become as well acquainted with it as though it had been written in English.

Moreover there could not now be the charge that in your love for the message of your friend you were guilty of making a fetich of the letter. For the letter that you now carry in your pocket, and which you so frequently open and read, is not the original copy that came from India, but the translation, if you carried the original copy which you cannot read, around with you, bending over it again and again, then there might be some colour for the charge of fetichism; but the fact that the copy which you carry and consult is not the one that came from your friend, and which his hands touched, shows that it is the message that you love and reverence, and not the paper and the letters. You would very naturally seek to preserve the original letter, but if it should be lost, you would have none the less doubt about the genuineness of the message.

But there might still be one more difficulty in your mind. What if the man who translated the letter for you did not do the work properly? Perhaps he was not competent, or perhaps he willfully inserted something or changed something, to serve some private ends. What will you do now? Why, you will get somebody else to translate the letter. Still, although you have only the one translation, and are not sure that it is a correct rendering, you do not have any doubt as to its having come from your friend, for it bears the impress of his own personality. You cannot be deceived in that, but you are in doubt as to certain parts. You want to be sure that you have the exact message of your friend.

So you get another man to translate the letter, and then another, and still another. If you think that the first man might have had such relations to the business matters referred to in the letter that he, perhaps unconsciously, gave the translation the colour of his own mind, instead of that of your friend, then you seek others who are differently related to the matter, so that if there has been any mistake the translations may correct each other.

Now you take all these different translations, and compare them. What do you expect to find? Do you expect and demand that all the translations shall be identically alike? If they are not, do you throw them away, and say that you cannot know anything about it? Not by any means. You will expect that there will be some slight differences. Indeed, if there are not, but if every translation is word for word and letter for letter the same, you will be in doubt more than before, for you will think that the translators have conspired to cheat you.

No; you do not expect to find any two of them exactly alike. If you have a dozen translations, you will find that certain expressions are the same in every one. Then you will find that certain other points are the same in three or four copies, and that they differ in the rest. And you will find that the copies that were exactly the same on these points are different on others, and that those that differed on the first are the same on the others.

Another thing that you will not fail to notice, is that you understand the letter a great deal better, with the different translations, than you did with only one. You are also sure that there is no serious error in any of them. If there should be a serious error in one, you would detect it by the fact that all the others, while not identical on that point, are uniform in thought, and all differ from the one. You will also find that the differences in the translations are not necessarily errors, but that the more translations you have, all presenting those slight differences, the clearer the thought is to you. One presents a phase of thought that is not fully expressed in another, and you need them all in order to get the fullest conception of the matter. And so after all, you have as good an idea of the matter contained in the original letter, as you would have if you were able to read the Hindustani.

Suppose, still further, that the letter was of such a general nature that it interests many people, and that they each wish to have a copy of it. Some make their own copies, and others hire copies made. These copies are scattered over the country, but in process of time the original letter is lost. Now someone suggests that these copies are full of errors, and that since no one

now living has the original letter you cannot know anything about the correctness of what you have. Now what can you do? Well, in the first place, you can be as sure that what you have is a letter from your friend as you could be in the case first supposed; for you recognize his thoughts. You know that the subject is one on which he alone would or could write. So that you know that the letter is from him, although for a moment you are thrown into doubt as to the correctness of the copy that you have.

You feel that you cannot afford to be in doubt in this matter. The letter is too important for that. So you set to work to collect all the copies that can be obtained. Then you compare them, just as you did the translations. What do you find? You possibly find that there are no two of them exactly alike, yet the most of them differ very slightly. In some you will find a word omitted here and there, for even the most careful copyist is liable to make mistakes. Let someone copy a page or a column of this paper, and he will see how easy it is to omit a word in copying.

But although a certain word is omitted in one copy, the fact that it is found in all the rest shows that it was in the original letter. Then in one copy you find several words omitted. On this point you search diligently, and you find that the words are in all the others. Looking carefully, you observe that in the copies which have the words, the last word before them is the same as the last word that is omitted in the one copy. What does this show you? Simply this, that in the original letter there were two lines that both ended with the same word, and that one of the copyists, after writing the first line, looked up and saw at the end of the next

line the same word that he had just written; and suppose that it was the line that he had just copied, and so he skipped that line.

And so you go through, and although you find little differences all through, the mistake that is made in any one is corrected by the others, so that you have no difficulty in learning the thought of the letter. And now mark this point: You are more sure of your letter, because of these many copies, even though there are little differences in them, than you would be if you had only one copy, or if all the copies were exactly alike. And why? Because in that case you would have nothing to show that there had been no forgery, whereas the slight differences proved to you that there has been no collusion, but that all the copyists have worked independently. And the most skeptical person must admit that in the beginning there must have been one copy from which all these came, either directly or indirectly.

The reader does not need to be told that all this is to illustrate some of the facts concerning our Bible. Sometimes the people are troubled over the fact that there are many copies and versions of the Bible, whereas they ought to be more confident of the genuineness of the Bible on that account. And if this article shall have the effect of removing any honest doubts, even though it be from the mind of but one person, it will be a cause of great rejoicing.