

## 4. TRANSLATE EACH INDIVIDUAL TEXT

One of the biggest problems with Bible translations is that the “scriptures as a specific collection” has taken on a life of its own to the extent that the Bible is viewed by many as one single piece of literature. Each individual scripture writing has the look of a chapter or a section in a large book. The title, the similarity of fonts and formatting throughout, the two major parts, the table of contents, the subtitles, and the chapter-verse divisions all constitute powerful genre and prominence codes that force topics and purposes on the individual writings that the authors never intended.

This does not mean that it is wrong per se for various writings of scripture to be collected together in some way. Collections, however, are not somehow outside the boundaries of literature. Collections of literature are in fact as common as literature itself. It would be difficult to find a home of literate people anywhere in the world where several well-planned collections of literature could not be found.

### **Collections of literature**

A glance at a shelf full of books in someone’s home may seem to reveal little more than a few rows of unrelated books, but a closer look will most likely show that a particular ordering has determined the placement of the volumes rather than pure randomness. Look further around the house, and smaller literature collections will be found: A place for children’s books, cook books, magazines, reference books, letters, maps, sheet music, school books, etc.

This is what readers do with books. They place them together according to certain categories or purposes. Sometimes books by the same author are kept together. The Jewish scriptures were collected like this. The Psalms, for example, are genre and author related.

Other collections may be topical such as sports, automobile repair, or sewing. Many collections are purpose driven like the maps stowed in the family car or the reference books kept close to a desk . Public libraries and bookstores are two more examples of collections of literature that are highly organized according to genre or prominence codes.

There are also collections of literature that are so intended by the authors. They include books written as a part of a series, and they also include books that are written as replies or answers to the books of other authors. In the Jewish scriptures, the books of the Law are obviously a series, as are the two parts of the writing to Theophilus (*Luke* and *Acts*) in the Christian scriptures.

Other collections are arranged according to the skills or the experience of the reader: There are books for learners or beginners, intermediate books, and books for the advanced. Then too, there are collections for very specific readers which would include private collections such as personal letters and diaries. There are also pieces of literature like these in the scriptures.

Lifting our eyes above the literature landscape we discover that much of life is characterized by collections. Automobiles are collected in parking lots, perishable foods are collected in refrigerators, clothes are collected in closets, dishes are collected in cabinets, photos are collected in albums, board games are kept together, silverware is placed in a single drawer, tools are kept in a chest, medicines are locked in secure cabinets.

There are logical principles behind all these collections whether they are pieces of literature or the things of daily life. First of all, collections always include things that have something in common. This is the principle of categorization. Secondly, collections are put together so the things in them can be easily found and used. This is the principle of practicality and purpose. Thirdly, collections sometimes revolve around a certain person or persons. This is the principle of relationship.

Isn't it interesting that these principles are similar to language codes? This is a strong demonstration of the fact that language reflects life and life reflects language.

The point of this discussion is that any collection of the scriptures should have good reasons behind it. These should be reasons that relate to the actual uses of literature among people. The Bible form of a scripture collection, however, violates most of these principles. Even the most obvious advantage of the Bible collection—the convenience of having all the scriptures together in one volume—is far too insignificant of a reason to offset the many barriers to understanding that such a collection causes.

It is simply not normal practice to put a collection of literature together in one volume in which the various pieces of literature are made to look alike and given altered titles to fit an overall scheme. Such a practice is not only impractical and expensive, but it hinders any further arrangements of the literature. The biggest drawback, however, is the way in which such a volume places the individual pieces of literature in a foreign context and alters their genre codes and prominence codes. Any attempt by anyone to publish such a collection would certainly raise the ire of the authors of the literature.

### **The wisdom of unbound collections of literature**

An unbound collection of the individual scriptures is greatly to be preferred to the bound version of a typical Bible translation. Though each book in an unbound collection may be closely related to the others, each one remains distinct from the others as well.

It disturbs no one about book collections that the individual books differ in color, size, print quality, or age. The individuality is actually a help to the reader and assures that the information in each book will be considered in its own right. A Bible translation with its static

framework, its sameness of formatting, and its altering of genre codes breaks down the distinctive character of each of the writings of scripture.

There are, of course, pieces of literature that do collect selections of writings in a uniformly formatted form. We call them newspapers, magazines, and special editions of text books that contain samples of writings (sometimes called anthologies) for use within the framework of literature classes. All of these examples, however, are pieces of literature designed for a specific readership and accompanied by genre codes and prominence codes that clearly orient the reader to the writings and articles included in the volume. For example, the sports section, editorial section, and comic section of a typical newspaper are all easily recognized and understood in context. Their purposes, topics, and settings are second nature to most American readers. This is not the case for a Bible translation, however. It has none of this in common with newspapers, magazines or anthologies.

An even more serious drawback to the Bible way of collecting the scriptures is that it makes it very difficult to place together those scriptures which actually do belong together according to the principles of topic, purpose, or reader-writer relationship. The way a Bible orders the writings, particularly the Christian scriptures, is quite chaotic. The case of First and Second Theophilus is the most blatant example of illogical placement, but there are many others. The so-called Gospels, for example, are by no means a logical collection according to their own genre and prominence coding. They have become a collective quartet in the minds of many people, but only due to traditional influences based on faulty understandings of their genre codes, situation codes, and prominence codes. The codes of the writings themselves do not allow such an arrangement.

The fact that the writings are bound together between the covers of a single book also prevents them from being put together in better, more meaningful, and practical arrangements. Mark and John, for example, would make a purposeful pair. Each is coded for people who know little to nothing about Jesus Christ. First and Second Theophilus obviously belong together. *The Book of the Life of Christ* (Matthew) and *What It's Like With Christ* (I John) would make another close pair based on complementary purposes.

It should be obvious by now that I am suggesting that the individual writings of scripture be treated not only as individual writings, but that any translation of one of them be done as an individual piece of literature. It greatly enhances the accuracy of the writings of scripture when each of them is given a look that corresponds to its own genre codes.

The Bible's "one book form" of literature exerts a powerful influence on the documents that are included in it. Just imagine, for a moment, including a biography of Abraham Lincoln in a large bound book that includes the religious writings of a distinct religious group. Consider how such a "setting" for information about Abraham Lincoln would influence a child to think of Abe Lincoln as a member of the group.

This example is farfetched, of course. No one would do such a thing with a book about Abraham Lincoln because it would not be appropriate. It would not be appropriate even if a close connection could be established between Abe Lincoln and the religious book in question. It would constitute a mixing of genre codes that would strike anyone as strange. For

similar reasons, it is also not appropriate for the many different writings of scripture to be bound together in a single volume with all the codes of a single piece of literature. Doing this also causes people to come to wrong conclusions. (See page 107.)

What are the appropriate genre codes for each of the writings of scripture? The answer is not the same for all of them. There is a great variety of literature genre among the scriptures. The person to ask concerning each of the scriptures is the author. Each author chose genre codes for his writing. He specified his own topic and purpose and recipient. These language codes in each text should be allowed to answer all the questions a translator might have about the genre of a translation. It's the responsibility of a translator to adequately reproduce these codes in a translation.

Does this mean that it's wrong to put any of the scriptures together in a book form? Not necessarily, but it should be done very carefully. The question that has to be asked is this: Will a bound collection enhance the actual genre codes of the writings or detract from them? A selection of the writings of scripture could conceivably be put together between covers if the reasons for doing it are related to the language codes of the writings and if the end result helps a reader to see what a first-century reader saw when viewing the documents. There are ways that this could be done, but what Bible translations have done up to now is an example of what *not* to do.

Does this sound like I'm suggesting that we do away with the New Testament as a framework for the Christian scriptures? Exactly. A New Testament form of a collection is not something holy or untouchable. Theophilus was not told anything about a New Testament, and yet he was assured that he could have complete assurance about the reliability of the scriptures (*λογoi*) that he'd been taught. The term *New Testament* is a genre code that has been added to the scriptures. It doesn't belong there. No writer of scripture ever mentioned it as a piece of literature or as a collection of the scriptures. It was not important to any of them and doesn't need to be important to any one else. It belongs in the trash bin of traditions that should never be allowed to become anything more than someone's not-so-bright idea.

It is neither radical nor irreverent to recommend getting rid of the *New Testament* as a title and as a form for a collection of the scriptures. Quite the opposite. It would be an important step toward freeing each individual writing of scripture to be what its author intended for it to be. Each of the scriptures is an individual work of a man appointed by Jesus Christ to be his personal representative and scribe. Each one was written by an eyewitness of the life of Christ. That is all that any of these writings needs to be. To make anything else of them is to *lessen* their value. Each of them should be allowed the right to be what it was originally meant to be.