Walking In The Light: A Comment On John 11.9-10

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Jesus answered, ”Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” (John 11.9-10, RSV)

Every Bible translator is familiar with the problem of understanding correctly the text which he or she is trying to translate. Sometimes a text is to be translated in a figurative or picture sense rather than literally, and the translator needs to be very much aware of how words are used figuratively in his or her language. In addition, the translator needs to recognize when figurative language is used in the original text, why it is used and what it means. The following comments are based on my impression that the figurative language in John 11.9-10 has not always been clearly understood and translated.

John's Gospel is different from the other three Gospels in several respects. One is that John includes a lot of figurative language, not only when he quotes Jesus, but also in his own writing, especially in the magnificent opening section.

Before I discuss these two verses in detail, let me mention some of the background for them. Jesus and his disciples had visited Jerusalem several times. Jesus did some miracles, including the healing of a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda and the healing of a man born blind. This did not make the Jewish leaders happy, but what outraged them was his speeches. Many times they wanted to seize him, and at least two times people actually picked up stones ready to kill him (Jn 8.59; 10.31 8.59; 10.31). Obviously, the disciples were scared when Jesus suggested that they should return to Bethany, only about two miles from Jerusalem (Jn 11.7 11.7). Their reaction is clearly stated in Jn 11.8 11.8: ”Teacher ... just a short time ago the Jews wanted to stone you; and you plan to go back there?” (Quote from TEV.) The disciples did not want to go back and risk being stoned and they told Jesus this quite plainly. In the following two verses (9-10) Jesus rebuked them, because they were unwilling to follow his guidance and the idea of going to Bethany. (I will return to this shortly.) After that Jesus insisted: ”Our friend Lazarus has 'fallen asleep'; but I am going there to wake him up.” (Meaning that if the disciples don't want to come along, he'll go alone.) The disciples still tried to avoid the trip, so they said, ”Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” (So we don't need to go at all.) Then Jesus told them plainly: ”Lazarus is dead! ... let us go to him.” Then the disciples gave in, and Thomas said to the other disciples (in my

words): ”O.K. If he insists, then let us all go, so that we can all be killed together.” Thomas was still a man of little faith.

I will discuss the first part of verse 9 first: ”Are there not twelve hours in the day?” The phrase twelve hours is emphasized in Greek by being placed at the beginning before the verb. It is obviously a rhetorical question. Both Jesus and the disciples knew very well that the day had twelve hours (in that part of the world). A common function of rhetorical questions in the NT is to rebuke, and this is a good example. But why is Jesus saying it like this?

The word ”day” is used in a figurative sense. The statement is clearly related in content to Jesus' statement in John 9.4 (TEV): ”We must keep on doing the works of him who sent me, as long as it is day; the night is coming, when no one can work.” There Jesus was confronted with a blind man. The disciples wondered who had sinned to make this happen. But Jesus said that it was not caused by sin. However, he was going to heal him. Likewise, Lazarus' illness was not caused by sin, and Jesus was set on going to heal him. In John 9.4 both ”day” and ”night” are used in a figurative sense. ”Day” stands for ”opportunity” or ”freedom to work”, while ”night” stands for ”no more opportunities” or ”no freedom to work any longer”. Therefore, if we interpret Jesus' statement in 11.9 in the light of his previous statement in 9.4, it seems clear that Jesus is saying that there is still time left to do the work which God had sent him to do; there is still an opportunity and a need to do a miracle. In fact, the raising of Lazarus is the last miracle John reports Jesus as doing.

The significance of the number ”twelve” may be better understood against the background of the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20.1-16). The employer went out to seek labourers at sunrise, at the third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hour of the day. Those who had been hired at the eleventh hour had only one hour in which to work (see verse 12). Therefore, as background information we know that a working day had twelve hours. So, Jesus is talking about a working day. However, it is not an ordinary working day, but a period of time allotted to him and the disciples in which they must do the works of God.

If the translator's language cannot use ”day” in such a figurative sense, then some clue has to be added. One possibility is that it might be enough to have a cross reference to John 9.4 here in John 11.9. Then the reader would have to figure out the meaning himself. In many situations this may be asking too much of the reader, and then some clue can be included in one of two ways. Either an explanation can be added in a footnote, or a clue can be included in the text. For instance, it might be possible to translate: ”Does the day not have twelve hours in which we must do the works of him who sent me?” The added words are supplied from John 9.4. Another possibility is to drop the figure of ”twelve hours in a day” and say ”There is still time for us to do the work of him who sent me.” Many English translations have added the phrase ”of daylight”, but that may easily lead the reader on to the wrong track, because not everybody associates ”daylight” with ”working time”.

Now let us continue with the rest of verse 9, and verse 10. Here Jesus gives a picture or parable in two parts. ”If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble/take offence, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles/takes offence, because the light is not in him.” This is full of words which are often used figuratively. The Greek word here translated ”walking” can be used in a literal sense, but very often it is used figuratively for ”living” or ”making decisions”. Compare, for instance, John 12.35-36 with its striking similarities in wording: ”Still for a short time the light is among you. Walk (in the light) while you have the light, so the darkness will not grab hold of you. He who walks in the darkness, does not know where he is going.” ”Light” stands for spiritual insight as well as for the one who gives spiritual insight, that is Jesus. ”Darkness”, of course, is the lack of spiritual insight. Or compare John 8.12: ”I am the light of the world. He who follows me, certainly shall not be walking in the darkness, but he has the light of life.” Or compare John 9.5: ”While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” From these contexts it seems reasonable to interpret ”walk in the day” as equivalent to ”walk in the light” and ”walk in the night” as equivalent to ”walk in the darkness”. Notice that ”day” is here figuratively associated with ”spiritual light and understanding” while in the previous sentence ”day” was figuratively associated with ”working time”. It often happens in the Bible that one term such as ”sheep” is used in different figurative meanings in different contexts. Therefore, we must be careful not to think that the same illustration always has the same figurative meaning. The context will show us what the intended meaning is. In verse 9a, it is the ”twelve hours” together with John 9.4 which helps us to see that the ”day” means ”working time”, and in 9b it is the phrase ”walk in” which helps us to see that the intended figurative meaning is one of ”spiritual light”.

The disciples acted wrongly by refusing to go to Bethany, because they did not follow the guidance given by Jesus as ”the light of the world”. The Greek dictionary by Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich suggests that in John 11.9 - but nowhere else - the ”light of this world” may be understood as meaning ”sunlight”. This is followed by Jacob A. Loewen in his article in the TBT of October 1983: ”The world in John's Gospel through West African eyes”. Jacob Loewen has a special case for John 11.9, where he suggests translating ”light” by ”sunlight” and dropping ”this world” altogether as redundant. I can see no linguistic or contextual reason for this. Rather, it seems in line with John's style to interpret ”the light of this world” as Jesus himself. Furthermore, the text does not say - as several translations put it - that ”he sees by this world's light”. The text says, ”he sees the light of this world.” The word ”light” is in the accusative as the object for ”seeing”. In English a similar metaphor is actually used. I can say: ”The disciples did not see the light in the matter of going to Bethany,” and people will understand that I am speaking figuratively, not talking about physical light or sunlight. The disciples were not open to follow the guidance of Jesus. That is why he rebukes them.

The NT uses both ”seeing” and ”tasting” in a figurative sense, for instance you can ”see death” or ”taste death”. Many languages cannot do this, and if the word ”see” cannot be used

figuratively as it can in English, then another word needs to be employed, possibly ”follow” the ”light”. It would be best if at all possible to keep the metaphor of ”light” because it occurs so many times in John's Gospel. Even if it is not a natural way of speaking in the translator's language, it may become a live metaphor which is understood from the various contexts in which it occurs.

Finally, the word for ”stumble” (proskoptw), which occurs 8 times in the NT, is with one possible exception always used in an extended or figurative sense. In a transitive construction it means to strike something against something else; and it is used in Matt 4.6 and Luke 4.11 in a symbolic usage, according to Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich. (This is the quote from the OT where the angels should protect Jesus, so that he would not ”strike his foot against any stone”, that is he would suffer no harm.) In an intransitive construction it literally means ”beat against” as in Matt 7.27, where the winds blew and beat against the house. Even if the word may be used literally here, it is part of an extended figure of speech, and the ”winds beating against the house” really stands for problems and difficulties which confront a person. Then the word is used three times outside the Gospels (Rom 9.32; 14.21; 1 Pet 2.8). The Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich dictionary gives the figurative meaning as ”take offense at” and GNB translates twice as ”stumble” (a word which is used figuratively in English) and once as ”make your brother fall”. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the two instances in John 11 are also figurative, meaning ”to go wrong”, ”to be misled”, or ”to stumble” in the figurative sense of that English word.

The question of how to translate this saying obviously depends on the translator's own language. It may be necessary to spell the metaphors out as similes with illustrations and comparisons clearly shown, for instance: ”Just as a person going around in broad daylight does not easily fall, because he has the sun to guide him, so does a person who follows my spiritual guidance not easily make wrong decisions. In the same way, just as a person who goes around in the night easily falls, because the sun is not shining to guide him, so does a person who does not follow my spiritual guidance, easily take the wrong decisions.” For the translator's own insight it is very useful to spell everything out like this, but I would not recommend it as a translation. It is too clear, clearer than the original text, and the reader has no fun in finding out the meaning for himself. I would prefer as far as possible to retain the figurative language and choose words which can be understood figuratively. It is probably not possible to keep all the words balancing between the literal and figurative senses as the original text does, but as many as possible should be retained. A possible translation for verses 9b-10 in English might be: ”Anyone who walks in the light does not stumble, because he sees the Light of this world. But anyone who walks in the darkness stumbles, because he does not have the light in him.” I have substituted ”light” for ”day”, because ”light” can be used figuratively in English in a sense which ”day” cannot. Again, I have kept ”walking” as a metaphor, because it is used this way in many places in the NT. The word ”stumble” is also a good word in English as it has both a literal meaning in connection

with literal ”walking”, and it has a figurative sense of making wrong decisions or making mistakes. The word ”Light” is spelled with a capital letter to help the reader see/understand that it refers to Christ himself. I know that capital letters will not help the listener, but in a translation for a largely literate society this is no great problem. Even in semi-literate societies I don't think it is a great problem. The pastor would be literate, and he would love to explain it to anyone who might not have understood it. However, the translation should be clear enough so that an average person with average education could understand it.

I would expect that most translations would have to attempt a rendering which is in between the two extremes I have suggested above. The reason that I have made these comments on these two verses in John's Gospel is a feeling that many English translations have not done very well, and if the translator does not fully understand the text himself, he has no chance of making an accurate, meaning-based translation.