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Say, Where's That Quote From?

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Суета сует: vanity of vanities

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a publishing boom as thousands of books that had been banned were now allowed, and thousands more topics, people, and events that had been erased from collective memory or simply forgotten were rediscovered and written about.

For translators, this meant all kinds of new dictionaries coming out, including dictionaries of Biblical quotes that are commonly used in English. Most translators in the former Soviet Union didn't recognize them when they read or heard them and had no idea what the Russian equivalent was.

But if the Soviet period had erased knowledge of the Bible, it hadn't quite purged all the Biblical quotes that had entered the Russian language in the previous 900 years. While I

haven't done a full study, I think there are fewer Biblical quotes used commonly in Russian than in English, since the Bible was the sole religious book read by millions of Protestant English speakers, while Orthodox Christians read many different religious books, like the lives of saints. But there are still a lot of quotes, and it's useful to be able to recognize them when you hear them. Some might even surprise you. Some might even surprise the Russians using them!

Some expressions, however, are easy to spot: козёл отпущения (scapegoat), земля обетованная (the promised land); манна небесная (manna from heaven); соль земли (salt of the earth); and запретный плод (forbidden fruit).

Other quotes are easily recognized even if their usage is sometimes a bit unexpected. For example: На праздниках Снежана смотрелась лучше всех в бархатном зелёном платьице и лаковых туфельках. Но не хлебом единым жив человек (During the holidays, Snezhana looked better than anyone in her green velvet dress and her patent-leather shoes. But man does not live on bread alone.)

I have found a few quotes more familiar to Russians than to English speakers, like this one: Как, работая и зарабатывая, не впасть в другую крайность: не начать служить мамоне? (When you work and earn money, how can you avoid going to the other extreme – when you start to serve mammon?)

But some are equally familiar in both languages, like суета сует (vanity of vanities): Суета сует и всяческая суета, говорила одна старушка на даче (Vanity of vanities and all kinds of vanity, as one old lady at the dacha used to say.)

The meaning of "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness" seems to have changed a bit over the centuries. It first was used to mean any desperate cry to do the right thing, like here: Все его призывы к добру ⊠ глас вопиющего в пустыне (All of his calls for people to do the right thing were like the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.) But now you may find it means a voice that was not heeded: Все мои хлопоты ⊠ глас вопиющего. До сих пор мама без квартиры (All of my efforts were like that voice in the wilderness. My mother still doesn't have an apartment.)

I know one phrase very well, because one of my friends, who cannot tolerate gossip, always says it: Вспоминай библейское: Не судите, да не судимы будете (You ought to remember the words of the Bible: "Judge not, lest you be judged.")

The phrase "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" is often used in Russian without the first part of Christ's plea — simply не ведают, что творят (they know not what they do). As a result, it's often much less lofty: Петя невозмутим: ведь ребята слишком молоды, не ведают что творят (Petya is unfazed: after all, the guys are young and they know not what they do.) And here, it sounds like forgiveness is not an option: Реформаторы делают вид, что не ведают, что творят (The reformers are pretending that they know not what they do.)

Some Russian speakers are surprised that the expression умывать руки (to wash your hands of something) comes from the Bible. Если он настаивает на своем, я умываю руки и слагаю с себя ответственность за возможные последствия (If he insists, I wash my

hands of it and I won't take any responsibility for the consequences.) It's a standard phrase now in Russian — the way its equivalent is in English — and easy to forget that it's what Pontius Pilate said of the crucifixion of Christ.

There are a few other phrases that have changed in meaning or connotation over the centuries. Нет пророка в своем отечестве (No prophet is accepted in his own country) is used often about Russian writers and public figures, and even sometimes about someone in, say, a company who warned of a disaster but was not heeded. But it was said by Christ and quoted (variously) in three books of the New Testament.

Sometimes the language of the early Bible translations caused confusion. Take the phrase ложь во спасение. This is literally "a lie for salvation," used to mean a white lie, an untruth said to avoid hurting someone's feelings. Это была лишь вполне понятная и простительная ложь во спасение (It was a completely understandable and forgivable white lie.) But this was a misreading of the Old Church Slavonic version of a Psalm verse: Ложь конь во спасение, во множестве же силы своея не спасется (A horse is a vain thing for safety; neither shall he deliver any by his great strength).

And how about these three phrases: Кто не со мной, тот против меня! (Who is not with me is against me!) Кто не работает, тот не ест (If a man will not work, he will not eat.) Кто с мечем придёт, от меча погибнет. (He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword.)

I asked some Russian friends, and they thought the first two were slogans from the 1917 Revolution. They knew the third one, but weren't sure where it came from. They certainly are part of Russian conversational speech.

For the record, the first is in the Gospels of both Luke and Matthew, the second is found in 2 Thessalonians, and the third is from a parable found in the Gospel of Matthew.

After a day of research on this, I've amended my new year's resolution to include: Think before you speak — Ибо кто не работает, тот да не ест.

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