

The Theory and Practice of Bible Translation

WHAT A BIBLE TRANSLATION IS AND IS NOT

There is a distinct difference between the manuscripts of the Bible, which are written in Hebrew and Greek, and translations of the Bible. I hear people talk about a translation as if it were the original Bible, and I hear people talk about manuscripts as if they were the original writings. This all needs to be made clear, so that people can have an accurate understanding of Bible translations. That is the point of the first two chapters of this book.

When we speak of “the originals” (the **autographs**), we are speaking of the actual writings of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. None of these originals exist any longer. When we speak of **manuscripts** we are usually speaking of Hebrew and Greek copies, of which there are thousands in existence. (There are, of course, “manuscripts” of ancient translations of the Bible in languages such as Latin, Syriac, Coptic, etc., but these belong to a separate category called ancient **versions**.) When we speak of “translations,” we

are referring to translations of the Hebrew and Greek texts into any number of languages.

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, with a few sections of Daniel penned in Aramaic. Copies of the Hebrew text are called Old Testament manuscripts. Translations of the Hebrew text are called Old Testament versions. As far as we know, all translations were made from Hebrew copies or from editions compiled from various copies, not from the original texts (the autographs).

The New Testament was originally written in Greek. Copies of the Greek text are called New Testament manuscripts. Translations of the Greek text are called New Testament versions. As far as we know, all translations of the New Testament were made from Greek manuscripts or from editions compiled from various Greek manuscripts, not from the original texts themselves.

The English Bible we hold in our hands (in whatever translation) has gone through quite a process. Let us imagine that we are reading the Gospel of Luke. The physician Luke wrote this Gospel in Greek, his native tongue, around A.D. 60. Luke's original (the autograph) no longer exists. Copies (manuscripts) of Luke's Gospel must have been made shortly after he produced his original work, and copies were made for hundreds of years thereafter. We have hundreds and hundreds of manuscript copies of the Gospel of Luke; a few of them date to a hundred or so years after the time he wrote the original. Such manuscripts are \mathfrak{P}^4 , \mathfrak{P}^{45} , and \mathfrak{P}^{75} . There are many more from the third century, even more from the fourth century, and so on. In due course, scholars have studied these manuscripts, decided which ones were the best, and then compiled editions of the Greek text. Most English Bible translators use these editions to make their English translations, but some

have translated straight from a particular Greek manuscript or used only a limited number of Greek manuscripts.

As we read the Gospel of Luke in English, we should realize that we are reading a translation of a copy (or copies) of the original text. Several people have been at work to make that original text accessible to us: (1) Luke, the writer who produced the autograph; (2) scribes who produced copies upon copies of this work; (3) archaeologists who discovered these copies; (4) paleographers who provided transcriptions of these copies; (5) textual critics who compared the copies and compiled critical editions of the Greek text; and (6) translators who produced English renderings of the Greek text.

Having this knowledge, one should realize that translators are working with copies of the original text—or editions made from various copies. Translators cannot alter the original text (by making additions to it or deletions from it) because they do not have the original texts and they are not the textual critics who have reconstructed those texts. Often, critics of Bible translators like to “spook” them with the admonition found at the end of the book of Revelation: “If anyone adds anything to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. And if anyone removes any of the words of this prophetic book, God will remove that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book” (Rev. 22:18-19, NLT). But this doesn’t apply to modern translators (at least not in the way this interpretation is usually intended); it applies to those attempting to alter the Greek text of the book of Revelation.

Interestingly, it is the **Textus Receptus** (the Greek text behind the King James Version) that has the most alterations to the book of Revelation. The man behind the Textus Receptus was Erasmus, who created the first printed edition of the

Greek New Testament (1516). Erasmus was not able to find a complete manuscript of the New Testament, nor anything earlier than the twelfth century. So he had to use several manuscripts for various parts of the New Testament. For most of his work, he relied upon two inferior manuscripts from the twelfth century (Codex 1^{cap} and Codex 2). For the book of Revelation, he used another twelfth-century manuscript, which lacked the last leaf containing the last section of Revelation 22 (Codex 1^r). For this section, as well as for others throughout Revelation where the manuscript was difficult to read, Erasmus used the Latin Vulgate and translated it back into Greek! Consequently, the Textus Receptus and KJV have erroneous verses at the end of Revelation. For example, in Revelation 22:14, the KJV reads, “Blessed are they who *do his commandments* that they may have right to the tree of life.” Superior manuscript evidence, followed by all modern versions, supports the reading, “Blessed are they who *wash their robes*, that they may have right to the tree of life.” The difference is very significant! The KJV tells us that works will get us eternal life; the better text tells us that we need our robes washed (i.e., we need to be cleansed by Jesus’ blood) to have eternal life. In Revelation 22:19 (quoted above), which is the very verse that warns against changing the text, Erasmus changed “tree of life” to “book of life.” This alteration still appears in the KJV and NKJV. These are the kind of textual alterations that critics should take notice of!

Those who choose to criticize a translation must look at the original language and then make a judgment about whether or not a translation faithfully renders the meaning of the best text found in the best manuscripts. Various scribes making copies of the Hebrew Scriptures or Greek Scriptures made many alterations to the text—especially the monks in the Middle

Agés! It has been the job of textual critics, ever since, to sort through these changes and provide translators with a reconstructed text.

DEFINING TRANSLATION

There are two basic theories and/or methodologies of Bible translation. The first is called **formal equivalence**. According to this theory, the translator attempts to render the exact words (hence the word *formal*, meaning “form-for-form”) of the original language into the receptor language. This kind of translation is commonly known as a “literal” translation; others call it a “word-for-word” translation.

The second kind of translation has been called **dynamic equivalence** or **functional equivalence** by the eminent translation theorist, Eugene Nida. He has defined the ideal of translation as “the reproduction in a receptor language [i.e., English] of the closest natural equivalent of the source language [i.e., Hebrew or Greek] message, first in terms of meaning, and second in terms of style.”¹ Nida, therefore, believes that a translation should have the same dynamic impact upon modern readers as the original had upon its audience. He elaborates on this as follows:

Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language.

This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose.²

¹ Nida and Taber, *Theory and Practice*, 210.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence has become a standard or ideal that many modern translators have attempted to attain. Goodspeed expressed this desire about his *American Translation* when he said, "I wanted my translation to make on the reader something of the impression the New Testament must have made on its earliest readers."¹

Another way of speaking about a functionally-equivalent translation is to call it a *thought-for-thought* translation (as opposed to a word-for-word translation). Of course, to translate the thought of the original language requires that the text be interpreted accurately and then rendered in understandable idiom. Thus, the goal of any functionally-equivalent translation is for it to be exegetically accurate and idiomatically powerful.

A good translation must be reliable and readable—that is, it must reliably replicate the meaning of the text without sacrificing its readability. At various points in the Scriptures, there is evidence that the biblical documents were written to be read aloud, usually in public worship (see Neh. 8; Luke 4:16-17; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:3). Undoubtedly, those ancient hearers of the Word understood the message as it was delivered to them. Any translation should be just as fluent and intelligible to a modern audience. This, of course, does not mean that translation can replace interpretation of difficult passages—as in the case of the eunuch who needed Philip's interpretation of Isaiah 53 (see Acts 8:28-35); but a good rendering minimizes the need for unnecessary interpretation (or *exegesis*, a technical term that means "drawing out the meaning of the text").

Ever since the time of Jerome (fourth century A.D.), who produced the translation known as the Latin Vulgate, there

¹ Goodspeed, *New Chapters*, 113.

has been debate over what is the best method to translate the Bible: the word-for-word approach or the thought-for-thought or sense-for-sense. In a letter to a person called Pammachius, Jerome exhibited this tension when he wrote:

I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that, in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy Scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery), I render sense for sense and not word for word.¹

When it came to translating the Scriptures, Jerome, contrary to his normal practice, felt the compulsion to render word for word; but he did not always do so in the Vulgate. Yet very few would now demand it of him because most agree that strict literalism can greatly distort the original meaning.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer and translator of the German Bible, believed that a translator's paramount task was to reproduce the spirit of the author; at times this could only be accomplished by an idiomatic rendering, though when the original required it, word-for-word was to be used.² Other translators have preferred to be very literal because they have feared that in translating on a thought-for-thought basis they might alter the text according to their own subjective interpretation. Indeed, it is true that a word-for-word rendering can be executed more easily than a thought-for-thought one; in doing the latter, the translator must enter into the same thought as the author—and who can always know with certainty what the author's original, intended meaning was? Therefore, a functionally-equivalent or thought-for-thought translation should

¹ Schaff and Wace, eds., *St. Jerome*, 113.

² Schwarz, *Principles and Problems*, 205-206.

be done by a group of scholars (to guard against personal subjectivism), who employ the best exegetical tools. In this regard, Beekman and Callow give excellent advice:

Translating faithfully involves knowing what Scripture means. This is fundamental to all idiomatic translation, and it is at this point that exegesis comes in. Toussaint, in an article in *Notes on Translation*, defines exegesis as follows: “Exegesis is a critical study of the Bible according to hermeneutical principles with the immediate purpose of interpreting the text.” In other words, its immediate purpose is to ascertain, as accurately as possible, using all the means available, just what the original writer, “moved by the Holy Spirit,” meant as he dictated or penned his words, phrases, and sentences. Exegesis thus lies at the heart of all translation work, for if the translator does not know what the original means, then it is impossible for him to translate faithfully.¹

The analysis in chapter 7 of the modern translations of the prologue to John’s Gospel will demonstrate how important exegesis is to translation. Major differences in translation come from major differences in interpretation.

In the final analysis, we must admit that there is no perfect translation of the Bible. There has never been one and there never will be, because it is impossible to convey in a translated language all that is contained in the original languages. There is an old saying that “Every translator is a traitor” (Latin, *translator traducor*) for not having done it just right. I don’t

¹ Beekman and Callow, *Translating*, 34–35.

think any translator would disagree, for everyone who has translated the Bible has felt the pull of two forces: the desire to accurately render the original text and the desire to do so in a way that communicates the message to modern readers. This cannot always be done. My own experience as the New Testament coordinator of the New Living Translation taught me again and again how daunting a task it is to produce a perfect translation. English was not created to do justice to Greek!

Let me give an example. John 1:14a literally reads, “And the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us, and we saw his glory.” To those versed in Scriptures, this literal rendering is quite rich. But to most modern readers it is obscure. Assuming that the reader has begun with verse 1 of John’s Gospel, he or she will probably realize that the Word is God. The reader might also realize that “became flesh” means “became human” (as in the NLT). Thus, they would probably understand that God became human.

But what does it mean that he “tabernacled among us”? Therefore, English translators attempt to render this in more communicable terms, using a verb such as “dwell” (RSV, NIV, NASB, NEB) or “live” (NRSV, NLT). While these renderings help English readers understand the basic meaning, they obscure a word that was pregnant with meaning to the original readers. The ancient reader of this Gospel, when hearing or reading the Greek word *eskenosen* (“he pitched tent” or “he tabernacled”), would associate it with the Old Testament tabernacle. In the Old Testament account, God lived among his people Israel by “tabernacling” among them in a tabernacle, or tent. His presence and glory filled that tabernacle; and wherever that tabernacle went in the journeys of Israel, God also went (see Exod. 40). With this image in view, the writer, John, must have intended his readers to see the connection between the Old

Testament tabernacle and Jesus, who is the new dwelling place of God. God lived in Jesus; those who realized it saw God's glory in him (as the next clause states— "we saw his glory"). The point is this: not one English translation can do perfect justice to John 1:14. A translator can either win on the side of literalism or win on the side of trying to communicate, but not both at once.

LANGUAGE CHANGES

Another challenge that translators face is that language constantly changes. Many statements in the KJV translation (published in 1611) no longer make any sense—or, worse still, communicate the wrong idea to modern readers. Let us look at some examples. According to the KJV, James talks about someone coming into a church who "weareth the gay clothing" (James 2:3). You know what that communicates to modern readers! 1 Samuel 18:4 says that Jonathan "stripped himself . . . to his girdle." Such language doesn't make it in the twenty-first century. These translations made perfectly good sense to contemporary readers, at the time when the KJV was translated. But the times have changed, and so has our language. "Gay clothing" communicates today something about the person's sexual orientation; "stripped to his girdle" communicates today that the man is a cross-dresser! Fortunately, modern versions, including the New King James Version, have made changes in these verses to accommodate modern ideas about sexuality.

Other verses in the KJV exhibit dated, male-oriented language, when such is not warranted by the text. For example, Paul tells the Corinthians, "In malice be ye children, but in understanding be men" (1 Cor. 14:20). Modern readers, accustomed to male-female equality, would take exception to

this rendering. And well they should. According to the Greek, Paul was encouraging his readers to “be mature”; it has nothing to do with maleness or manliness.

In another instance, Paul tells his readers, “Quit you like men” (1 Cor. 16:13, KJV). According to a modern, yet literal, translation, this would be “act like men” (see NASB). But the real thought here is simply an encouragement to bravery. Thus, many modern versions say “be brave” (NKJV, NJB, TEV) or “be courageous” (NLT). Some critics would say these modern renderings show that the translators caved in to feminist pressures. Interestingly, the Greek word (*andrizomai*) in ancient Greek literature wasn’t applied to men alone; women were also encouraged to *andrizomai*.¹ Thus, a male-originated word had become an idiom for bravery many centuries before the New Testament was written. How anachronistic to translate it as if bravery was only a male virtue!

Bible translators need to stay current with shifts in modern English language if they want to communicate the message of the Bible to modern men and women. In the 1970s, the Modern Language Association (the primary association for English professors worldwide) began to issue statements encouraging writers and teachers of writing to avoid using the masculine pronoun wherever possible because this would help relieve English from an unnecessary, long-standing, male-dominated orientation. This position made sense to many English professors, who promoted this in the colleges. This position was also adopted by grammar schools and in educational textbooks. By the 1980s it had become established in the American educational system. Writers had to find ways to avoid using the masculine pronoun to refer generically to any person. Writers also

¹ Bauer *et al.*, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 64.

had to find synonyms for the word “man” when speaking of a human being.

Of course, Bible translators can choose to ignore this shift in English language, and they can justify their use of the third person singular “he/his/him” by saying that they are being true to the original languages. But the fact is, failure to cope with this shift in language signals failure in communication. American readers under the age of thirty will misunderstand many passages of Scripture. Furthermore, a persistent use of the third person singular “he” or “man” may not even be an accurate translation.

The Greek language has two words that can be translated “man.” The first is *anthropos*; the second is *aner*. The word *anthropos* primarily designates a human being, regardless of sex. It can also be used of a male individual—as in John 1:6, which says “there was a man sent from God named John.” The context makes it clear whether the word is referring to people in general or males. There are hundreds of verses in the Bible where the reference is to human beings in general, not to males. The KJV and other literal translations (RSV, NASB, NKJV) use the words “man” or “men” in these verses. To many modern readers, who understand “man” or “men” as referring to males only, these verses are very exclusive. Let us look at some examples from the KJV:

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

“In him was life; and the life was the light of men”
(John 1:4).

“For there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

“We trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men” (1 Tim. 4:10).

Clearly, the intent of these passages is that God has some wonderful things (his word, life, and salvation) to offer to all human beings, not just males. Therefore, to translate this in current times as “men” fails to deliver the message of the text. Not only are modern sensibilities against doing this, it is unnecessary to use the term “man” when the words “people” or “human beings” communicate the same idea and are intelligible to all readers.

The other Greek word for “man” is *aner*. It designates a male person (as opposed to a female), an adult, or a husband. It is also used to specify certain people groups. In most instances, it should be translated as “man” or “husband” or “the people of such and such a place.”

The notion of gender inclusiveness carries over to the term “brother” (Greek *adelphos*), a term frequently used by Paul. In a literal translation, the word is simply rendered as “brother.” But many scholars understand the meaning of this term, in context, to refer to all the believers, male and female. In other words, when the writers of the New Testament Epistles addressed their readers as “brothers,” they were not speaking only to the male believers.

In the early church, it is apparent that both male and female believers gathered together for fellowship (see Acts 1:14; 12:12-13; 16:13; 17:12; 1 Cor. 11; Col. 4:15). During these gatherings the Epistles would be read to them. It is also clear from a close reading of the Epistles that Paul was speaking to both the men and women in the church (see, for example, 1 Cor. 7; 11; 14; Philem. 1:1-2). At certain points in his letters, he would give specific admonitions to husbands or to wives,

separately—indicating that he expected both to be in the audience (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18). Peter did the same (see 1 Pet. 3:1, 7). This indicates that both men and women were included in Paul’s audience, as well as in Peter’s. At other times, Paul would make direct appeals in his writing to certain female believers, such as Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), or he would pass along his greetings to various female Christians, such as Priscilla, Junia, and Julia (see Rom. 16:3, 7, 15).

Given this context, it seems right to translate “brothers” as “brothers and sisters” if we are trying to communicate accurately the historical situation of the early church to modern readers. This translation effectively communicates what Paul meant when he addressed his readers as “brothers.” Surely, he was including male and female believers.

The same could be said of the term “sons.” In most New Testament verses the term for God’s children is “sons.” Since God’s “sons” are *all* of his children, whether male or female, it could be misleading to only use the word “sons” in a Bible translation that seeks to communicate the biblical message effectively. The question for translators is this: Did the writers use this to mean male believers only, or did they use it to speak of all believers who now share a special life-relationship with God?

During the past twenty-five years I have preached and taught Paul’s epistles quite frequently. In four instances Paul uses the word “sons” to describe all believers (see Rom. 8:14, 19; Gal. 4:6-7). Whenever I read these passages, I found myself explaining to the females in the audience that “sons” was an inclusive term. I told them that they were not excluded from passages that extolled the spiritual benefits of being “sons.” I think Paul would concur. In fact, Paul had told the Galatians that there is no longer “male or female” when it comes to

understanding our new position in Christ and in the church (Gal. 3:28). In the NLT, for example, the word used in all the above-mentioned verses is “children,” not “sons.” This translates the meaning of the text, not the literal words.

Furthermore, the NLT corrects the traditional mistranslation of “sons” found in several verses in the KJV. The Greek word for “sons” is *huioi*; another Greek term, *teknoi*, means “children.” Because the period in which the KJV was translated was one in which male-dominated language ruled, the term “sons of God” appears in John 1:12, Phil. 2:15, and 1 John 3:1-2, when it should be “children [*teknoi*] of God.”

Finally, let’s look at a more sensitive issue: the translation of the titles “God the Father” and “God the Son.” In recent years, some radical feminists have demanded that God not be presented in patriarchal terms in translations of the Bible. This means they think that expressions such as “God our Father” should be changed to “God our Parent,” and that Jesus should be called “the Child of God,” not “the Son of God.” But these kinds of translations violate the original intent of the Scriptures, which is to present God as “Father” and “Son.” Modern versions, including the NRSV and NLT, respect this revelation and translate accordingly. Throughout these versions, Jesus is called the “Son of God” or “Son of Man,” never the “Child of God” or “Child of Humanity.” And “the Father” is a consistent rendering of *ho patros*.

As would be expected, there has been some resistance against modern versions that incorporate gender-neutral language. Some individuals, such as Wayne Grudem (President of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood), have strongly criticized certain modern versions of the Bible for bowing to feminist pressures. Quite specifically, the *New International Version: Inclusive Language Edition* was the

target of the criticism because it was believed by its critics to have mistranslated the Bible in the interest of making it gender-inclusive.¹

Grudem insists that a translation must be literal in order to be accurate. He glories in his literalism—but only a certain kind of literalism—that which fits his agenda of being faithful to male-oriented language. But Grudem gets caught in his own trap. In one of his articles, Grudem uses the pronoun “he” when referring to the Holy Spirit. He says, “It is terribly presumptuous of translators to think they can be sure they are able to foresee all the possible implications and subtle nuances that the Holy Spirit intended when he caused Scripture to be written exactly as it was.”²

Surely, Grudem knows that “the Spirit” in Greek (*to pneuma*) is neuter, not masculine. Shouldn’t a literalist insist that we use the pronoun “it” when referring to the Spirit? After all, Grudem just told us in his article that every single word must be translated just as it is. Why, then, does Grudem use “he,” not “it,” when referring to the Holy Spirit? Because “he” has been deemed the appropriate pronoun in English to communicate the personhood of the Spirit. If translators talked about the Spirit as an “it”—though this would be literally accurate—this would not convey the right message to readers. The point is this: translators must not only know the meaning of the text, they must also know how to communicate that meaning in the receptor language, which is constantly changing.³

This last point is well worth emphasizing: translations must change as the language changes. There is nothing sacrosanct

¹ Grudem, “Battle for the Bible.”

² *Ibid.*

³ For more on this issue, see the printed debate between Grudem and Osborne: “Do Inclusive-Language Bibles Distort Scripture?” See also Carson, *Inclusive Language Debate*.

about a translation—it is changeable and fluid. By contrast, the text underlying the translation should not be changed because it is sacred and inviolable. Unfortunately, the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible were altered by various scribes throughout the ages, but textual critics have worked hard and long to recover the original wording as much as possible. Readers need to keep these distinctions in mind.

All too often these distinctions are blurred by people who want to warn translators against making changes in the Bible. Those who make such warnings often confuse the notion of “original documents” with “translations.” For example, when it comes to assessing textual inviolability, people must not compare a Bible *translation* to a document like the Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is an *original* document written in English; as an historical document, it should not be altered or modernized. Likewise, the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, also historical documents, should not be changed. But this “inviolability” cannot be applied to *translations* of the Scriptures. They have to change—in order to keep up with the changes that happen in any and all languages. These changes do not alter the original text; rather, they make the original text clearer to modern readers.

By way of concluding this section, as well as this chapter, let me use the Gettysburg Address as an example of what the difference is between doing the work of textual criticism and doing a translation of the text. Most people don’t know that there are five different versions of the Gettysburg Address. In the first version, Lincoln wrote, “This nation shall have a new birth of freedom.” In the fifth and final version, Lincoln wrote, “This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.” The task of a textual critic is to discover when the phrase

“under God” appeared in the text. Was it in the first edition and then dropped out? Or was it added later—by Lincoln or someone else? Textual scholars of the Gettysburg Address are certain that it was added later—in this case, by Abraham Lincoln himself.

The task of translating the Gettysburg Address is a different one. A translator needs to choose which version of the address he or she is going to translate and then give a faithful rendering in current language. If the Gettysburg Address was being translated into Spanish, the translation would not have a literal rendering of “Four score and seven years ago.” It would simply contain the modern Spanish expression for “eighty seven years.” And a modern Spanish translation would not give a literal, male-oriented rendering of the phrase “all men are created equal.” Rather, it would contain the modern, Spanish way of saying “all people are created equal.”

Anyone who has tried to translate the Bible will honestly admit how difficult a task it is. Those who stand on the sidelines and criticize the efforts of those who have been engaged in Bible translation work need to try their own hands at it. They themselves will inevitably be criticized for not rendering a certain Hebrew or Greek phrase accurately—or, when having done so (they think), for doing it in an unintelligible manner. Translators will be criticized by lexical purists for not having produced a literal translation or by modern readers for failing to communicate. Most criticism would abate if people took the time to understand the methodology at work behind each translation.