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The Bible Translated by Brian Watson

After my last two articles (about Bible transmission and early English Bible translations) some of you have asked what the “best” translation is. I will save you some time: there is no such thing as a perfect Bible translation and the “best” translation will depend on who is reading it. The important thing to know, more than *what* is the best Bible, is *why* there are different translations. Therefore, in order to talk about specific Bible translations and make some suggestions, there are some things to know, including translational issues and philosophies.

First, the original languages of the Bible were Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic (mostly found in a few chapters in Ezra and Daniel), and Greek (the New Testament). Second, the goal of a translator is to take the original language and translate it into a foreign (or receptor) language that can be understood. If translators are not true enough to the source language, they are not producing an accurate translation. If the audience reading the receptor language cannot comprehend the translation, it is not an accurate translation. In *A User's Guide to Bible Translations*, David Dewey writes, “An accurate translation communicates to today's readers (or hearers) the same meaning that the original author's text conveyed to his original readers (or hearers).” Third, please do not be bothered that there is no “perfect” translation of the Bible. The doctrine of inspiration applies only to the original autographs, not to copied manuscripts and translations, and modern Bible translations are very accurate.

To better understand the nature of translation, let us consider an Italian pun: *traddutore, traditore*. This phrase literally means, “translator, traitor.” The point is that all translation betrays the original language. There is no such thing as a perfect, literal, word-for-word translation, at least not one that would make sense to readers of English. The problem is that different languages have different rules of grammar as well as different idioms and expressions. This

pun also illustrates that point well, because the word play works in Italian but does not make a great deal of sense in English – or, at the least, it is not very funny in English. Anyone who has studied foreign languages and has tried to do any translating knows the difficulties involved in taking one language and making it speak in another.

Since a perfect translation is not possible, translators must choose how they are going to translate. This choice results in a particular translation philosophy. The three major choices are a literal (or formally equivalent) translation, a thought-for-thought (or dynamically equivalent) translation, or a free translation (or paraphrase). Each of these has strengths and weaknesses.

A literal translation attempts to produce as much of a word-for-word version as possible. However, there will be times when a literal approach will not produce a comprehensible translation. Imagine you were translating from French to English, and you had to translate the phrase “J'ai le cafard.” That phrase is an expression that means, “I'm depressed.” If one were to translate that in a literal fashion, it would read, “I have the cockroach.” Obviously, in that case a literal translation produces a less meaningful – and less accurate – rendering. All literal translations have to use, on occasion, a thought-for-thought rendering. Literal translations have the benefit of being more transparent, showing the reader the original words and styles used by the original authors of the Bible. However, they often require additional tools to help the reader understand the text, such as pastors/teachers, study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, or commentaries.

Dynamically equivalent translations do not try to translate word-for-word, but thought-for-thought. Paragraphs of the original languages are broken down into thoughts and rearranged to make the best sense in the receptor language. Sometimes the translation will be literal but often it will not be. The result is a translation that is easier to read, one

that has fewer interpretive difficulties that a pastor, teacher, or commentary would have to resolve for the reader. Dynamically equivalent translations often have easier vocabulary, make interpretive decisions, and are suitable for a somewhat lower reading level.

A paraphrase is not truly a translation, but a free rendering of the original languages into idiomatic (and sometimes quirky) English, usually by one person. (Nearly all modern translations are made by committees, a process that began with the King James Version.) A paraphrase should never replace a literal or dynamically equivalent Bible translation, because it makes too many interpretive and unique translational choices. However, you could read one to give you a fresh look at Scripture. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* is the most popular paraphrase available today.

Some have recommended reading one Bible version from each of these three camps of translations. If you read a formally equivalent Bible, a dynamically equivalent Bible, and a paraphrase, you will thoroughly know God's Word. If you want to know more about the translation you currently use, go to the front of your Bible, before the actual biblical text, and read the preface. The preface will tell you some of the history of that translation, as well as its translational philosophy.

With that information at hand, let us continue to discuss specific English Bible translations. As I wrote last time, the King James Version of 1611 became THE English Bible for over 300 years. Though the KJV was revised several times (most KJV Bibles use a text from 1769), by the late nineteenth century there were compelling reasons to produce a new version. One reason was the inevitable change of the English language. A second reason was the discovery of new manuscripts. Important manuscripts from as early as the fourth century were found in the nineteenth century. A third reason was

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an improved understanding of biblical history, culture, and geography.

In England, the Revised Version, based on the KJV, was completed in 1885. It was more literal than the KJV, but also much more wooden. Famous preacher Charles Spurgeon said it was "strong in Greek, weak in English." The American Standard Version, very similar to its British counterpart, was published in 1901. The ASV is important because it became the basis for the Revised Standard Version (which led to the New Revised Standard Version and the English Standard Version) as well as the New American Standard Bible. Though the RV and ASV were significant translations, they did not displace the beloved KJV, which retained its popularity.

The first major translation to challenge the KJV was the RSV, of 1952. The RSV was controversial, in part because it was produced by an ecumenical committee representing about 40 denominations, in part because the age in which it was published (this was the era of McCarthyism), and in part because of some choices made by the translators. One such choice was the decision to translate the Hebrew word *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 to "young woman" instead of "virgin." This Hebrew word actually means "young woman." However, the verse is a prophecy of Jesus' virgin birth and Matthew quotes it by using the Greek word for "virgin." (The Septuagint, an early Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates the same word into the Greek for "virgin." The New Testament writers used the Septuagint when quoting the Old Testament.) Some evangelical Christians labeled the RSV a liberal (or even Communist) Bible. That judgment was unfair. However, perception became more important than reality in this case.

Evangelicals sought to create their own Bible translations. The first was the NASB, which the Lockman Foundation first published in 1971. This translation was very literal and it retained archaic language ("Thee" and "Thou," which are not reflected in the original languages) as well as the poor tradition of publishing each verse as a new paragraph. It also uses italics for words not found in the original languages, a device used in the

KJV, but one that makes little sense for us, since italicized words express *emphasis*. The NASB was the best-selling Bible in America in 1977. The 1995 update removed the archaic language.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the general trend was to produce a Bible that is easier to understand. This trend led to the New International Version, which was completed in 1978. The NIV has been the best-selling Bible for many years. All the translations mentioned so far have been literal translations. The NIV is the first major dynamically equivalent translation and it soon became the preferred Bible among evangelicals. A revision of the NIV will be published next year. Since many of you have a copy of the NIV, you do not need a lengthy introduction to it. It is a fine translation and next year's revision will probably be a good choice.

Recent translations include the NRSV, a revision of the RSV; Today's New International Version, a revision of the NIV; the Holman Christian Standard Bible; and the English Standard Version, yet another revision of the RSV. The first two, completed in 1989 and 2004 respectively, use gender-inclusive language. Simply put, they use phrases such as "brothers and sisters" and "humankind" instead of "brothers" and "mankind." The idea is to include women when both genders are the intended audience. This translational practice should not be offensive (though I prefer to see the original language), but it practice created some controversy in 1997 when Zondervan was going to publish a revision of the NIV called the NIVI (NIV Inclusive).

A conservative response to the gender-inclusive controversy produced the ESV and the HCSB. The HCSB, finished in 2004, is a product of the Southern Baptist Convention. The goal was to produce a Bible somewhere between formally equivalent and dynamically equivalent. The result is a Bible somewhat similar to the NIV, though more on the literal side. We have the HCSB in our pews.

The ESV went back to the RSV and made

some changes, taking away archaic language, and producing a more conservative text. Crossway Books, the publishers of ESV, call it "essentially literal." That is to say, it is literal (or formally equivalent), but not so literal as to be wooden. It is generally more readable than the NASB. The ESV was first published in 2001 and the award-winning *ESV Study Bible* was introduced in 2008. Ryan and I both use the ESV and whole-heartedly recommend it. If you want to follow the text read in sermons at our church, you would do well to get this Bible. I would also recommend the *ESV Study Bible*. Personally, I think it is the best one-source volume available, for it has not only footnotes but also charts, maps, articles and more.

The NIV remains a solid choice for a dynamically equivalent Bible. Next year's revision will probably be worth having. Though we would rather have you read the ESV, the NIV is a good translation and the *NIV Study Bible* remains a valuable resource. There are two other dynamically equivalent Bibles to consider: the New Living Translation and the Contemporary English Version. The NLT is a dynamically equivalent translation based on a paraphrase called *The Living Bible*. The CEV is easier to read and would be good for children or those who do not read much.

A note on the New King James Version of 1982: it features updated language, avoiding the archaisms of the KJV, but it is based on the same inferior manuscripts and it maintains some of the mistranslations of the KJV. For these reasons, I cannot recommend the NKJV. However, if you read this translation, you are still reading God's Word. No major point of doctrine will be compromised should you choose to read any of the above-mentioned translations. (The issue of study Bibles is different for some have doctrinally biased notes.) One's personal choice over which translation to read should never become a divisive issue. The most important thing is that you are reading the Bible.