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## REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY BIBLE TRANSLATION

HOWARD R. MACY

In the last fifty years we have witnessed a vigorous period of Bible translation, in English and many other languages, along with the enthusiasm, controversy and, sometimes, bewilderment, that often accompany this work. In the last fifteen years alone we have seen on average nearly one significant new translation each year, not to mention the steady flow of “study Bibles” designed to help readers deepen their understanding of the text. The many translations grow in large part out of better reconstruction of the Hebrew and Greek biblical texts and in response to rapid changes in contemporary language and culture. Beyond whatever cynicism one might have about niche-market translations, we can still say that updated translations are needed.

The point of Bible translation, simply put, is to help people read or hear the Bible in their own language. From the translation of the Old Testament into Greek beginning nearly three centuries before Jesus Christ, through John Wyclif and Martin Luther, to the impressive work today of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, this purpose remains unchanged. Two principles guide their work: translations must be both accessible and accurate. In the flurry of translations (and the fury that sometimes surrounds them), virtually everyone embraces these goals and principles. However, though translators agree on what to do, they often disagree, sometimes sharply, on how to do it. In this essay we will examine these basic principles and some of the issues that arise in applying them.

### BASIC PRINCIPLES

What does it mean for a translation to be accessible? It means simply that the Bible is rendered in the ordinary language of the intended hearers and readers. It takes into account the readers’ level of diction and vocabulary, their conceptual world, and the range of usage that is clear and acceptable to them. The *Today’s English Version*, for instance, provides an impressive modern example of meeting the goal

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of accessibility. By carefully selecting a limited vocabulary its translators have made the Bible more approachable for unsophisticated readers and people who have English as a second language. Other versions reach out to different reading constituencies. One reason for the steady stream of new translations in English is the continued effort to keep the biblical text fresh and clear in the face of rapid changes in the English language itself.

What does it mean for a translation to be accurate? At root, it means to convey as precisely as possible the meaning of the text, not adding or taking away information found in the original. Accuracy improves, in my judgment, if the translation also conveys the spirit and rhetorical power of any particular text. Ordinary language should not be puffed up; language with poetic power should not be flattened. The goal of accuracy also drives the continuing revision of Bible translation as, through continuing study, we gain better insights into the original texts, languages, and cultures of the Bible.

Translation theories lie on a continuum with word-for-word approaches on one end and paraphrases on the other. Modern translations typically gather around one of three poles on the continuum. *The King James (Authorized) Version* (KJV, AV) and its heirs such as the *American Standard Version* (ASV), the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), and the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) gather around “literal” translation (“formal equivalency,” “word-for-word”) approach to the text.

The goal is that as nearly as possible (though it is often not possible) the translation will replicate the words and syntax of the biblical text. Such translations often help in some types of Bible study, but equally often they may read somewhat woodenly and still not adequately capture the sense of the text.

Most contemporary English translations gather, in varying measure, around the “dynamic equivalence” theory with its meaning-for-meaning approach. This theory recognizes that accuracy often requires more fully taking into account the idiomatic nature of language. Phrases must often take precedence to words so that modern readers may experience the same meaning and impact that the text had on its first readers. Prominent examples of this approach are the *New International Version* (NIV), the *New American Bible* (NAB), the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), the *New Jerusalem Bible*

(NJB), and, by its translators' claim, the *New Living Translation* (NLT).

Paraphrases are even more idiomatic and often more boldly interpretive. The older *Living Bible* (LB) and Eugene Peterson's *The Message* are excellent contemporary examples. Still further toward the end of the continuum are the challenging and entertaining portions Clarence Jordan adapted as *The Cotton Patch Version*.

### SPECIFIC ISSUES

Beyond these three general approaches to translation, consider some of the specific issues translators encounter in this work. The first is the steady tension between form and meaning. For accuracy's sake, it would seem right to adhere as closely as possible to the words and forms of the original text. Often this practice brings excellent results, and where it does this principle probably should be followed. But often it doesn't. For example, the Wycliffe specialists who have been translating the Bible into the Duna language of New Guinea have found challenges in both form and basic vocabulary. The Duna language, for example, does not use rhetorical questions, so such questions in the Bible must be changed into positive statements. For example, the rhetorical question of Isaiah 50:2, "Is my [God's] hand shortened that it cannot redeem?" would be (mis)understood by Duna readers as a question seeking information rather than a way of asserting God's strength.

The Duna language also presents challenges to vocabulary and even basic conceptual categories. The Duna people know nothing of animals in the Bible like camels, sheep, horses and donkeys. They have no wheat, so they have no bread except what might be imported by the very rich. Instead, the staple in their diet is the sweet potato, of which there are many varieties. Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35) in that setting are puzzling, while "I am the sweet potato of life" comes very close to conveying the meaning of Jesus' words. Similarly, in the Quiche culture, to translate in Psalm 14 that it is people with "clean hands" who can come into the presence of God would convey the idea that it is "lazy people" who are welcomed there.

Though these examples may be more dramatic and entertaining than others, everyone who has tried to translate between two

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languages knows these difficulties. French idioms, for example, literally translated into English are often more comical than sensible. And I have read far too many ponderous translations of German theological works into English that seemed to try to preserve the German sentence structure. In the end, conveying meaning accurately must take precedence to preserving form.

A related issue is how the semantic range of similar words overlaps in moving from one language to another. Sometimes there is little overlap, such as with the Hebrew word *hesed*, which has no single corresponding word in English. Typically translators render it “steadfast love” or “faithful care” or in similar ways, but none is really adequate. In rendering “The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever” as “God’s love never quits,” Eugene Peterson captures a strong sense of it, but even this doesn’t carry the full denotative and connotative weight of the Hebrew original. Similarly, the word *love* in the Bible points much more toward loyalty than romance, quite the opposite of common modern sensibilities. Finding just the right word or phrase is often a challenge.

In the process of translation, we must continue to honor the fact that the Bible does come to us from particular times and places. That is part of the important Christian witness to special revelation, a concept that offends some today just as it did in the pluralistic world of the early Church. Translations, then, need to make the Bible accessible to modern readers without acquiescing to contemporary culture. They should not embed, intentionally or unintentionally, our cultural preferences or cultural sensibilities in the biblical text. Though any translator must make interpretive choices, translation and biblical interpretation should largely be separate processes. Certainly, serious Bible readers and interpreters will sometimes struggle in engaging the text and the cultural distance that we often encounter in it, but we should not gloss over that distance by amending the biblical text. Instead, in translation we can preserve the integrity of the biblical text and in interpretation we can discover the ways in which it is timeless and keenly relevant. Faithful translation and textual revision are two entirely different projects.

## THE CHALLENGE TO FAITHFULNESS

The challenge to provide readable, reliable translations is constant and complex, but, happily, this good work continues both in English

and in hundreds of other languages. The results bring great benefits and, sometimes, controversy.

The liveliest current controversy about Bible translation revolves around “gender-accurate” or “inclusive-language” translations. The general concerns for accuracy and accessibility are both put to the test here.

“Inclusive” versions assume that where the original biblical texts intend to include both men and women, translators should choose words and forms to express that intent. For example, if Paul addresses the whole church, men and women, at Philippi as “brothers,” then modern translations might show Paul’s meaning by rendering the text as “brothers and sisters.” Or if women are part of the target audience of Psalm 1, “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,” a gender-accurate version might use the plural “Blessed are those who....” Or Proverbs 20:24, “A man’s steps are ordered by the Lord” (RSV) might become, “All our steps are ordered by the Lord” (NRSV). These examples show three of several methods inclusive versions may use to bring clarity: adding a clarifying word, changing number from singular to plural, and changing from a third-person singular to a more inclusive first-person plural or second-person plural pronoun.

In the cause of accuracy, those who follow a word-for-word translational theory object that adding words or changing person and number does not faithfully render the words and form of the text. Examples of traditional versions that do not use inclusive language tend to be based on this approach. They include KJV and its modern variations, RSV and NASB. Interestingly, the paraphrase *Living Bible* is traditional on this point while its successor twenty-five years later is inclusive.

Proponents of the “dynamic equivalence” approach are divided, but many would argue that a strict word-for-word approach may actually misrepresent the meaning of the text. Inclusive translation, they insist, often more accurately conveys the sense of the text. Most versions from the last fifteen years are gender-inclusive. Examples include the *Good News Bible* (GNB or TEV), *Contemporary English Version* (CEV), NAB, NJB and NRSV.

The more recent versions are responding to the concern for accessibility. They recognize, for example, that many people no longer understand terms like “man” as gender-generic or inclusive in

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meaning. Using traditional approaches in the face of this well-documented shift in language usage threatens to distance women from the Bible, an unintended but real consequence.

The translators of the widely popular *New International Version* (NIV), sensing the need to be more inclusive, prepared a revision that was published in England in 1995 and was scheduled for publication in the United States. The prospect of its stateside publication brought a firestorm of protest from influential conservative groups and leaders. Inflammatory attacks on the *NIV: Inclusive Language Edition* (NIVI) included charges that it was a “stealth” Bible, that it was pandering to contemporary culture, that it was contributing to “the feminist seduction” of the Church and much more. Facing strong political and economic pressure, NIV publisher Zondervan withdrew its plans for a United States edition. In my judgment, this is a sad outcome based on power politics and inadequate understandings of the translational issues of accuracy and accessibility, issues that NIVI serves well. (Two fine books that describe both this controversy and the details of translational methods around it are D. A. Carson’s *The Inclusive Language Debate* [Baker, 1998] and Mark L. Strauss’ *Distorting Scripture?* [InterVarsity, 1998].)

Another recent version, the *New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (NTPI), published in 1995, serves accuracy and accessibility less well. It adapts the text to include not only women, but also people of color, people with disabilities, left-handed folk, and others. It regards traditional language of God as “Father,” “Lord” and “King” as problematic along with language about Jesus as “Son” or “Son of Man.” The version offers corrective translations like the opening of the Lord’s prayer, “Father-Mother, hallowed be your name. May your dominion come” (Luke 11:2). Or NTPI renders Jesus’ self-identification as God’s son as, “No one knows the Child except the Father-Mother; and no one knows the Father-Mother except the Child...” (Matthew 11:27).

Whatever gains may be made in accessibility (which I guess may be few) are certainly overwhelmed by losses in accuracy. In essence, this version replaces the particularities of biblical times with the particularities and peculiarities of the late twentieth century. Perhaps it would be better billed as a paraphrase. Instead, as a translation it stands as an example of a heavy-handed refashioning of the biblical text itself to pander to the sensibilities of a modern niche market. Certainly we can have vigorous discussions about how to understand

and appropriate language like God as “Father” and the “Kingdom of God,” but to embed those debates in a translation distorts and limits the biblical text.

The process of Bible translation has always stirred controversy. No doubt it always will. Yet we still continue to need new translations to bring the Bible to us with fresh accessibility and up-to-date accuracy. I am glad for the array of excellent translations, including the gender-accurate ones, which we have now and look forward to the outstanding new translations yet to come.