

The Scriptures V: Translation & Interpretation

The Translation of the Scriptures

Introduction

The Scriptures were originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek ([Note of translation: Koine – common, not classical Greek](#)). Therefore in order for us to know what God has revealed to man, it is necessary to have the Scriptures translated into our languages

This is something that was taken for granted by the Lord Jesus and his apostles. In the Day of Pentecost, each heard in his own language the Word of God. We saw how the apostles used the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the OT) since this was the common language at the time

Now we should think about the difficulties of such a task. Aramaic is a dead language, the Hebrew of the OT is very different from the one spoken today because all languages evolve. In fact, the Hebrew text did not have vowels and these had to be added in order to be able to read the passages

The same applies to the NT Greek, which is not only different from the one spoken today but also different from the Greek written in ancient times. In general, this was the Greek commonly spoken by the people, but different from Classical Greek

Some of the grammar rules that applied to those languages are no longer in place today; some of the idiomatic expressions of the time are no longer current and some terms have changed their meaning, even the pronunciation is different. It is a daunting task to translate any book from Antiquity and even more so the Bible, since it is the Word of God and there is a tremendous responsibility to be faithful to the original intent and rendering of the authors.

Imagine a Bible translator stumbling into a no longer used expression in the original text and that would sound unintelligible to a modern reader What should he do? A literal translation? Or interpreting the author's thought? And what if we have a modern equivalent expression to describe the same fact, would it not be better to use the current equivalent expression?

[Addition of translation](#): “The task of the Bible translator is to communicate the content of the Biblical texts originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, in the native language of the readers for whom the translation is being prepared... the translator is concerned with equivalence, that is, he is concerned that his finished translation communicates accurately what the original author wrote.” Robert Martin – Accuracy of Translation – Banner of Truth, page 6

In light of some of these Bible translation difficulties, let us consider in the first place:

I- Scripture Translation Techniques

There are mainly two techniques for Scripture Translation:

1- **Formal Equivalence:**

It is to translate the Bible as identically as possible as written in the Original language, in order to attain the highest degree of literality with respect to the Original. In this criteria, each term in the original language is translated – if possible – with an equivalent expression into the language it is being translated into.

A Greek noun, is translated with an equivalent English noun, verbs are translated by equivalent verbs, etc. This technique has the advantage that it draws the reader as close as possible to the original text of the Bible and to the surrounding culture of both original writers (and readers).

Somebody has written: “...*this technique focuses its labor within the framework of a transcribing discipline, and not in what the sacred writer could have written had he done it in the language to which it is translated, but in what the Greek, Aramean or Hebrew states.*”(Revista Biblia Textual/ Reina-Valera, Pg.16)

Note of Translation: “When we ask what method of translating best communicates the content of the original text, formal equivalence translators answer that the content of the original is best communicated when the translator consciously tries to parallel closely the linguistic form of the original (i.e. the structure, grammar and exact wording of the original)” Dr Robert Martin – IBID – page 7

The difficulty lies in the lack of understanding the meaning, especially in the translation of expressions that are literally incomprehensible. (Ex Rom 12:20) NAS “you shall heap *burning coals heaping upon his head*”

2- **Dynamic Equivalence**

Peter Puigvert - a Spanish theologian - writes: “*This method seeks primarily to communicate the contents of the original message, not so much the words but the message, with the aim of having the contents make sense to the readers... it should consider the effect of the message in the original recipients in order to value its true meaning and therefore translate it to an equivalent text which may cause the same effect to the modern readers.*” (How did the Bible arrive to us? Pg.192-193.) Ex: Rom 12:20 NIV: “*By this, you will call him to be ashamed of his conduct.*”

Another writer says: “...*during the development of the process of translation, the text should suffer the necessary transformation, so that the current reader may be transposed to the place of the original reader.*”(Revista Biblia Textual/ Reina-Valera, Pg.16)

The problem with this technique is that translating to impact the modern reader in the same way the original recipient was impacted, many times what ends up translated is not what the original writer wrote, but what the translator believes he said. (Ex.1Th 4:4)

“Let each one of you possess his own vessel in sanctification...” versus “let each one of you possess his own wife in sanctification ...” or “let each one of your keep his own body in sanctification...”

Gabriel Verd writes as quoted by Peter Puigvert,: *“The dynamic translation of Scripture it is not only a good genre of translation but a necessary one. It is necessary for the people as a version to create the first impact, with a simple Reading to which one must renounce to certain things in order to achieve a higher penetration. However, I do not believe this is the ideal translation - if such a thing exists - because its danger lies precisely in that restricting the form, very frequently the content is lost.”* (Ibíd., Pg.196)

Addition of translation: “Dynamic equivalent translators focus not so much on the form of the original text but on the response of the modern reader... the dynamic equivalent translation is based on the principle of equivalent effect rather than on the principle of formal linguistic equivalence” – IBID – Page 8

*NOTE OF TRANSLATION: The extremes in each technique would be the **Literal** (Interlineal translations) and the **Paraphrased versions**, which fit the extreme of the spectrum of Formal Equivalent and the Dynamic Equivalent techniques*

Which of the two translation techniques shall we follow? I am confident to answer this question with conviction.

There are two things to consider regarding this matter. It is not possible to have only one genre of translation in a given version. There will always be the need to use another, even though a given version may be primarily formal equivalent or dynamic. (1Sam 24:3)

NAS And he came to the sheepfolds on the way, where there *was* a cave; and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the inner recesses of the cave.

KJV And he came to the sheepcotes by the way, where *was* a cave; and Saul went in to cover his feet: and David and his men remained in the sides of the cave.

Secondly, the choosing of one translation technique in and of itself, does not guarantee whether the version will be good or bad. There are good and not so good, formal equivalent translations of the Bible and the same can be said about dynamic equivalent versions.

Without being dogmatic, I would rather choose a formal equivalent translation over a dynamic, without discarding the value of dynamic versions for consulting purposes. I respect differing opinions on this matter

II- AVAILABLE VERSIONS

Note of translation: at this point, we took more liberties, since we are dealing with English and not Spanish translations

Every student of the Bible should have more than one translation. No particular version is perfect or inspired and therefore it is subject to error and inaccuracies. The use of more than one version will enhance our understanding of the meaning of a passage.

Secondly, as much as we should esteem and appreciate older translations, we must not by pass the existing advantages of modern versions of the Bible if they have been done with faithfulness.

Thirdly, it is one thing to translate under persecution or duress, with limited resources and few manuscript copies at hand, than doing it in times of peace, with plenty of time and many resources readily available at the disposal of a translation team of experts whose goal is to obtain accuracy in translation. (Ex. Pr 18:24)

Note of Translation:

אִישׁ רַעִים לְהִתְרַעֵעַ וְיִשׁ אֲהָב דָּבַק מֵאָח:

A man [who has] friends [comes to] ruin, there is a friend [who] loves [as a] brother

NAS A man of *many* friends *comes* to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

KJV A man *that hath* friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend *that* sticketh closer than a brother.

New RVA 24 Hay amigos que uno tiene para su propio mal, pero hay un amigo que es más fiel que un hermano.

Old RVA 24 24 El hombre que tiene amigos, ha de mostrarse amigo: Y amigo hay más conjunto que el hermano.

The older translators either by confusing characters (too difficult to explain here) from the Byzantine text, or by adding their own interpretation changed the meaning of the words.

Having said that, let us consider some of the most readily available versions we have today in English

THIS PORTION DIFFERS FROM THE SPANISH VERSION

English Versions

- [BLB \(Better Life Bible\)](#)
- [CEB \(Common English Bible\)](#)
- [CEV \(Contemporary English Version\)](#)
- [ESV \(English Standard Version\)](#)
- [GNT \(Good News Translation\) / TEV](#)
- [GW \(God's Word\)](#)
- [HCSB \(Holman Christian Standard Bible\)](#)
- [ISV \(International Standard Version\)](#)
- [NAB \(New American Bible\)](#)
- [NASB \(New American Standard Bible\)](#)
- [NCV \(New Century Version\)](#)
- [NET Bible](#)
- [NIV \(New International Version\)](#)
- [NJB \(New Jerusalem Bible\)](#)
- [NKJV \(New King James Version\)](#)
- [NLT \(New Living Translation\)](#)
- [NRSV \(New Revised Standard Version\)](#)
- [REB \(Revised English Bible\)](#)
- [RSV \(Revised Standard Version\)](#)
- [Tanakh \(NJPS\)](#)
- [TEV \(Today's English Version\) / GNT](#)
- [TNIV \(Today's New International Version\)](#)
- [TM \(The Message\)](#)
- [TSNT \(The Source New Testament\)](#)
- [TV \(The Voice\)](#)
- [WEB \(World English Bible\)](#)

<http://betterbibles.com/versions/>

Appendix: Scripture Interpretation

Introduction

This will not be covered in detail, but we will only mention the basic principles that must regulate the proper interpretation of a Biblical passage

Hermeneutical Principles

1) *-Unless told to the contrary by the author or the context, always follow the literal, grammatical and historical rule of interpretation*

2) *Obscure passages must be interpreted according to their context and in light of the more clear passages*

3) *Implicit statements must be interpreted in light of explicit ones and not all the way around (a note against arguing from silence)*

4) R. C. Sproul writes: *"I am convinced that if this particular rule were followed, the great majority of the doctrinal differences that divide us would be settled. It is that point of confusion between the implicit and the explicit, in which we so easy to fall into negligence"* (The Knowledge of the Scriptures, Pg.86)

Sproul warns us to beware of not squeezing too many implications from a text if there are not too many explicit implications evident (For example: the gender of angels), and then he adds: *"We not only get in trouble for drawing too many implications from a passage, but also we face the problem of having to give those implications, with what the passage explicitly teaches. Whenever an implication drawn contradicts the explicit meaning of a text, the implication must be rejected."* (Ibíd. Pg.89)

5) *Unless the context indicates otherwise, all passages must be interpreted literally*

6) *Symbolic passages must be interpreted in light of the literal.* (Ex Revelation versus Paul's Eschatology)

7) *The OT must be interpreted in light of the NT* (Heb 1:2)

8) *We must pay attention to the grammar of the Original text and to its historical context.* Hence our need of Lexicons, Commentaries and other study tools

9) *The illumination of the Holy Spirit is indispensable.*

Conclusion

Let us value the privilege we have of being able to handle several Bible versions and not suffer persecution for it

Having the Bible in our own language cost the blood and tears of many. And even in our day, in some countries, it is still a crime to carry a Bible

Let us not waste our privilege to know more of the Word of God and to live more according to it. For this we must know as closely as possible the original meaning of the Biblical authors so that we may properly interpret it

This subject of the Doctrine of the Scriptures, is key and fundamental, for the development of the rest of the topics we will be studying under Systematic Theology