

THEORIES OF THE TRANSLATION PROCESS*

Bruce M. Metzger

If, according to the traditional rendering of Proverbs 13:15, "The way of the transgressor is hard," the way of the translator is scarcely less hard. Not only does the work of translation demand the utmost in concentrated effort, but the result will seldom please everyone, least of all the conscientious translator. Since not all the nuances in a text can be conveyed into another language, the translator must choose which ones are to be rendered and which are not. For this reason the cynic speaks of translation as "the art of making the right sacrifice," and the Italians have put the matter succinctly in a proverb, "The translator is a traitor" (*traduttore, traditore*). In short, except on a purely practical level, translation is never entirely successful. There is always what Ortega y Gasset called the misery and the splendor of the translation process.¹

The work of translating the Bible presents special difficulties. Since the Scriptures are a source of both information and inspiration, Bible translations must be accurate as well as felicitous. They must be suitable for rapid scanning as well as for detailed study, and suitable for ceremonial reading aloud to large and small audiences. Ideally, they should be intelligible and even inviting to readers of all ages, of all degrees of education, and of almost all levels of intelligence. Such an ideal is, of course, virtually impossible to attain.

Bruce M. Metzger is Professor of New Testament Language and Literature, Emeritus, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

* This is article two in the four-part series, "Translating the Bible: An Ongoing Task," delivered by the author as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, February 4-7, 1992.

¹ Jose Ortega y Gasset, "Miseria y esplendor de la traducción," *Obras completas*, 4th ed. (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1958), 5:433-52.

The problem is compounded by the diversity of theories of the translation process. Should the translation be literalistic or free and paraphrastic? At what level of English style should it be pitched? Is it right to introduce into the rendering cultural explanations, and if so, how frequently? In the printed format of the Bible, should pronouns that refer to Deity be capitalized? Is it advisable to print the words of Christ in red ink? All these are legitimate questions that need to be considered by Bible translators. Perhaps it is well to note the graceful phrasing of metaphors for the translation process that the King James translators addressed to the reader near the beginning of the preface to their version (a preface that unfortunately is seldom included in modern printings of that version):

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most Holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water, even as Jacob rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well, by which means the flocks of Laban were watered.²

Basically there are two competing theories of translation. In one the predominant purpose is to express as exactly as possible the full force and meaning of every word and turn of phrase in the original, and in the other the predominant purpose is to produce a result that does not read like a translation at all, but that moves in its new dress with the same ease as in its native rendering. Of course in the hands of good translators neither of these two approaches can ever be entirely ignored. The question is merely which should come first, and which second, in the translator's mind; and when the two are in conflict and it is therefore necessary to choose between them, the question is which side is to be sacrificed. This article discusses examples of various kinds of translations of the Scriptures down through the ages.

TRANSLATIONS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

AQUILA

Early in the Christian era, a Jewish scholar named Aquila was dissatisfied with the Septuagint translation and undertook to produce a Greek rendering of the Hebrew Scriptures that would represent each Hebrew word with a corresponding Greek word. The result of following this procedure was the production of a ren-

² *The Translators to the Reader; Preface to the King James Version 1611*, ed. Edgar J. Goodspeed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 21.

dering that was so slavishly literal that it was often unintelligible to a reader who did not know Hebrew as well as Greek. For example in Genesis 1:1 the Hebrew text prefixes the word **תְּ** to "heaven" and to "earth" in order to indicate that these words are the object of the verb "create." Aquila, however, understood **תְּ** to be the Hebrew preposition, spelled the same way, and therefore rendered the text **εποιησεν ο[φ]εις sun ton ou[φ]anon kai sun th[η] gh[η]**, a rendering that is totally un-Greek.

SYMMACHUS

Toward the end of the second Christian century another Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was prepared. This was by Symmachus, an Ebionite Christian of Jewish background. His theory and method were the opposite of that of Aquila, for his aim was to make an elegant Greek rendering. To judge from the scattered fragments that remain of his translation, Symmachus tended to be paraphrastic in representing the Hebrew original. He preferred idiomatic Greek constructions in contrast to other versions in which the Hebrew constructions are preserved. Thus he usually converted into a Greek participle the first of two finite verbs connected with a copula. He made copious use of a wide range of Greek particles to bring out subtle distinctions of relationship that the Hebrew cannot adequately express. In more than one passage Symmachus had a tendency to soften anthropomorphic expressions of the Hebrew text.

JEROME

Jerome's approach is puzzling. On the one hand in his letter to Sunnia and Fretela, Jerome declared that the work of a good translator consists in rendering idiomatic expressions of one language into the modes of expression native to the other.³ In another letter, addressed to Pammachius, he discussed the best method of translating literary works in general, and stated, "From my youth up I have always aimed at rendering sense not words.... A literal translation from one language to another obscures the sense."⁴ At the same time, however, Jerome made an exception when it came to the Bible. He added a qualification, "In translating from the Greek I render sense for sense and not word for word-except in the case of the Holy Scriptures, where even the order of the words is a mystery."⁵

³ Jerome, Epistle 106. 3. 3.

⁴ Ibid., 57.6.

⁵ Ibid., 57.5.

Here Jerome clearly advocated two different methods of translation, depending on whether the original is a secular or a sacred text. In the Bible every word is sacred. In his letter to Paulinus, Jerome wrote, "The Apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words,"⁶ and these mysteries must be preserved in the translation. Since the order of words transcends human understanding, a change in the order of words not only destroys this mystery, but it also endangers the profundity of the sacred text.

All this seems to be clear enough until one looks at Jerome's work in preparing the Latin text of the Vulgate. His declaration of policy in translating Scripture seems to be inconsistent with his general practice. It is perplexing that although Jerome advocated the word-for-word method of Bible translation, he was not always consistent in following it. Perhaps the best solution to this anomaly is to suggest that in making the Vulgate translation Jerome had in fact renounced a great part of the ornamentation of style and paraphrase he was accustomed to employ when dealing with secular works, but nevertheless allowed himself a certain amount of freedom and variety of renderings in the Vulgate.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

English translations of the Bible present a great variety of types of rendering.

THE KING JAMES VERSION

In the preface to the 1611 English version, the translators set forth their theory of translation. At some length they declared:

We have not tied ourselves to an [*sic*] uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words, as some peradventure would wish that we had done, because they observe, that some learned men somewhere, have been as exact as they could that way. Truly, that we might not vary from the sense of that which we had translated before, if the word signified the same in both places (for there be some words that be not of the same sense everywhere) we were especially careful, and made a conscience, according to our duty. But, that we should express the same notion in the same particular word; as for example, if we translate the Hebrew or Greek word once by *Purpose*, never to call it *Intent*; if one where *Journeying*, never *Traveling*; if one where *Think*, never *Suppose*; if one where *Pain*, never *Ache*; if one where *Joy*, never *Gladness*, etc. Thus to mince the matter, we thought to savour more of curiosity than wisdom, and that rather it would breed scorn in the Atheist, than bring profit to the godly Reader.⁷

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.9.

⁷ *The Translators to the Reader; Preface to the King James Version 1611*, 36.

As examples of the wide variety of translation in the King James Version one can point to the 11 ways in which the Greek verb *menw* is rendered in the New Testament, including "abide," "remain," "continue," "dwell," "tarry," "endure," "stand," and "be present." Even within the space of a few verses in 1 Corinthians 13 four renderings of the same Greek verb are used: "prophecies, they shall *fail* . . . knowledge, it shall *vanish away* that which is in part shall be *done away* ... I *put away* ... childish things." Clearly the apostle had some purpose in reiterating the key word of this passage, but this purpose is lost to the reader of the King James Version.

EDWARD HARWOOD'S TRANSLATION

After the publication of the King James Version and its general acceptance in succeeding generations, its position was challenged by a classical scholar and biblical critic named Edward Harwood (1729-1794). Dissatisfied with what he termed "the bald and barbarous languages of the old vulgar version," that is, the Authorized Version, in 1768 Harwood issued a rendering of the New Testament in the elevated style of English that was current among many British authors in the second half of the 18th century.⁸ The opening sentences of the Parable of the Prodigal Son are an example of the contrived and artificial style imposed on the simple and direct language of the Gospel of Luke. "A Gentleman of a splendid family and opulent fortune had two sons. One day the younger approached his father, and begged him in the most importunate and soothing terms to make a partition of his effects betwixt himself and his elder brother--The indulgent father, overcome by his blandishments, immediately divided all his fortunes betwixt them."

Likewise the simple and chaste language of Mary's Magnificat in the King James Version (Luke 1:47-48) was transposed by Harwood so as to read, "My soul with reverence adores my Creator, and all my faculties with transport join in celebrating the goodness of God, my Saviour, who hath in so signal a manner condescended to regard my poor and humble station. Transcendent goodness! Every future age will now conjoin in celebrating my happiness!"

⁸ The title page reads, "*A liberal translation of the New Testament; being an attempt to translate the Sacred Writings with the same Freedom, Spirit, and Elegance with which other English translations of the Greek Classics have lately been executed* ... with Select Notes, Critical and Explanatory. By E. Harwood (For T. Becket and Others, London, 1768)."

NOAH WEBSTER'S BIBLE

Altogether unlike the garish style used in Harwood's rendering was the sober and restrained revision of the King James Version that Noah Webster, the lexicographer, issued at New Haven, Connecticut, in 1833.⁹ His purpose, he wrote in the preface, was to remove obsolete words and phrases and to correct errors of grammar and mistranslations. Examples of the former are the use of "who" for "which" when it refers to persons; "it" for "his" when it refers to plants and to things without life; "falsehood" for "leasing"; "hinder" for "let"; "button" for "tache"; "boiled" for "sodden"; "Holy Spirit" for "Holy Ghost." Errors of grammar are "Whom do you say I am?" and the occasional use of the singular number of the verb with a plural subject (e.g., Luke 5:10; 9:17). About 150 words and phrases which Webster found to be erroneous or misleading were corrected in the various passages where they appeared. Practically all these changes have been adopted by later revisers, who found his judgment sound as to the need of change.

In addition to the kinds of changes mentioned above, Webster introduced another kind of amendment in the language, which he considered of very grave importance. In his own words,

To these may be added many words and phrases, very offensive to delicacy and even to decency.... Language which cannot be uttered in company without a violation of decorum, or the rules of good breeding, exposes the scriptures to the scoffs of unbelievers, impairs their authority, and multiplies or confirms the enemies of our holy religion.¹⁰

JULIA E. SMITH'S TRANSLATION

Another idiosyncratic rendering, published a century after Harwood's version, was produced in 1876 by an American translator, Julia E. Smith. This rendering has the distinction of being the first translation of the entire Bible made by a woman. It was issued at her own expense by the American Publishing Company of Hartford, Connecticut. The title page declares that it was "translated literally from the original tongues," and in the preface Smith indicates that she "endeavored to put the same English

⁹ The Webster Bible was reissued in 1987 by the Baker Book House of Grand Rapids.

¹⁰ In the following passages Webster introduced various euphemisms in place of the expressions used in the King James Version: Genesis 20:18; 29:31; 30:22; 34:30; 38:9, 24; Exodus 7:18; 16:24; Leviticus 19:29; 21:7; Deuteronomy 22:21; 23:1; 28:57; Judges 2:17; 1 Samuel 1:5; 1 Kings 14:10; 16:11; 21:21; 2 Kings 9:8; 18:27; Job 3:10-12; 40:17; Psalms 22:9, 10; 38:5; 106:39; Ecclesiastes 11:5; Isaiah 36:12; Ezekiel 16 and 23; John 11:39; Ephesians 5:5.

word for the same Hebrew or Greek word everywhere," for she considered that this gave a "much clearer understanding of the text." The result, however, was a rendering teeming with obscurities and nonsense on almost every page.

Paying no attention to the function of the Hebrew *waw* consecutive, she frequently used the future tense in translating Hebrew] verbs in historical narrative, giving the reader the impression that everything in those narratives, including the acts of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, was yet to happen! The extent of the obscurity is suggested by Jeremiah 22:23, presented as a complete sentence and reading, "Thou dwelling in Lebanon, building a nest in the cedars, how being compassionated in pangs coming to thee the pain as of her bringing forth."

THE REVISED VERSION (1881-1885)

In 1870 the Province of Canterbury of the Church of England issued a proposal that a committee should be formed to undertake a revision of the Authorized or King James Version of the Bible.¹¹ At first it was hoped to keep the work entirely in Anglican hands, but eventually Free Church scholars, plus one Unitarian, joined the revision committee. As was to be expected, the great majority of the members of the revision committee had been trained at Oxford or Cambridge. At that time, according to the judgment of C. J. Cadoux,¹² these two universities inculcated quite different ideals for the translation process. The Oxford method aimed at conveying the sense of the original in free idiomatic English without too much regard for the precise wording of the former; the Cambridge method paid meticulous attention to verbal accuracy, so as to translate as literally as possible without positive violence to English usage, or positive misrepresentation of the author's meaning, and to leave it to the reader to discern the sense from the context. For good or for ill, the Cambridge genius presided over the English Revised Version.

The rules set before the revisers were rigid and conservative. For example it was determined that, so far as possible, only such expressions were to be used as were already present in the King James Version. It is no surprise that by following this rule there was actually an increase of archaic English expressions in the revision.

¹¹ It is significant that the Province of York refused to cooperate in the task of revision on the ground that it would deplore any recasting of the text of Scripture.

¹² C. J. Cadoux, *The Bible and Its Ancient and English Versions*, ed. H. Wheeler Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 251.

As a sample of the sometimes unidiomatic English, the rendering of Luke 9:17 can scarcely be regarded as good English style: "And they did eat, and were all filled: and there was taken up that which remained over to them of broken pieces, twelve baskets." The evaluation of the New Testament in the Revised Version by the famous London preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon was brief and to the point: "The revision is strong in Greek but weak in English." Nevertheless for those who desire an English version that presents a formal equivalent of the original texts, the Revised Version has no equal.

Like the Revised Version, the American Standard Version is extremely literalistic.

DYNAMIC EQUIVALENT TRANSLATIONS

At the other extreme to translations that present a formal equivalent are those that seek to offer what can be called a dynamic equivalent. The prime mover in developing such translations, whether in English or in other languages, has been Eugene A. Nida, long associated with the American Bible Society. Trained in linguistics and competent in many related fields, Nida has published extensively¹³ and has prompted other scholars to carry on similar projects.

"Dynamic equivalence" is defined as "the quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors. . . . The opposite principle is formal correspondence."¹⁴ More recently the term "functional equivalence"¹⁵ has been used to describe such a quality in the translation.

Whichever term is preferred, the process involves the rewording of expressions and customs not well known today. For example in Psalm 23:5 the literal translation, "anointed my head with oil," is replaced with what is deemed to be its modern equivalent, "welcomed me as an honored guest." Applying the process of dynamic equivalence in translation, in 1966 the American Bible

¹³ For a bibliography of Nida's publications from 1945 to 1975 see *Language Structure and Translation: Essays by Eugene A. Nida*, selected and introduced by Anwar S. Dil (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 274-83.

¹⁴ Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Tabor, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 202.

¹⁵ So described in the subtitle of the book by Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986). See also the appendix entitled "Diverse Theories of Translation," 182-87.

Society issued Robert G. Bratcher's rendering of the New Testament in Today's English Version, under the title *Good News for Modern Man*. Subsequently with the assistance of several other scholars, the translation of the Old Testament was finished in 1976 and issued with the New Testament, as the *Good News Bible*. The apocryphal or deuterocanonical books followed in 1979. The version uses contemporary American English, and has won wide acceptance because of its ready intelligibility.

The most recently produced translation (1991) that embodies "functional equivalence" is the American Bible Society's Contemporary English Version, under the title *Bible for Today's Family*. Originally intended as an easily understood Bible for young people, the version was recognized as having appeal for a much wider audience. The New Testament, produced by Barclay Newman and others for the American Bible Society, is somewhat similar to the *Good News Bible*; it is an idea-by-idea translation that arranges the text in a sequence understandable to today's readers of English. The translators were also concerned about using gender-inclusive language for men and women.

PARAPHRASES

The difference between a translation and a paraphrase may be expressed as follows: A paraphrase tells the reader what the passage means, whereas a literal translation tells what the passage says. Of course a paraphrase can be useful, just as a commentary is a useful tool for Bible students. The first paraphrase of the New Testament in English was prepared by an Anglican, Henry Hammond (1605--1660), and entitled *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon all the Books of the New Testament* (London, 1653). In the following century Samuel Johnson commended this pioneer work of English biblical criticism. In the 20th century, paraphrases have once again attracted readers, first through the publication of J. B. Phillips's *Letters to Young Churches* (1947), followed by Kenneth S. Wuest's *Expanded Translation of the Greek New Testament*, 3 volumes (1956-59). A few years later a paraphrase of the entire Bible was published through the Lockman Foundation under the title *The Amplified Bible* (1962). This contains comments, enclosed within brackets, that clarify the sense of the original text. F. F. Bruce's characteristically careful work appeared in a volume entitled *The Letters of Paul: An Expanded Paraphrase* (1965).

By far the most popular biblical paraphrase has been Kenneth N. Taylor's *The Living Bible, Paraphrased* (1971). This is a

simplified, easy-to-follow rendering in idiomatic present-day English. At times, however, the text is greatly expanded by imaginative details for which there is no warrant in the original. A clear example is Amos 1:1, where the first 16 words of a literal word-to-word English rendering (such as that of the American Standard Version) are expanded to 46 words. Sometimes in the interest of smoothing away a difficulty, Taylor takes unwarranted liberties with the text. For example, contrary to what the Synoptic Gospels report, John 12:14 states that Jesus Himself found the donkey on which He rode into Jerusalem; The Living Bible takes care of this problem by eliminating the passage.

SUBSIDIARY QUESTIONS

Over the years preferences of style in printing English have changed. Neither in the King James Version nor in subsequent English versions down to the 20th century have translators capitalized pronouns that refer to Deity. It is only rather recently that several translations have adopted this practice, including the Amplified Bible, the Berkeley Version, the New American Standard Version, and the New King James Bible. Though such a practice is thought to show more reverence, it must be acknowledged that there is absolutely no such differentiation made in the Hebrew or Greek text.

Furthermore where does one stop in applying such a misguided policy? If the translator capitalizes third person pronouns (he, his, him), what should be done with the relative pronouns (who, whom, whose)? Should one capitalize "you," even in speeches of unbelievers that are reported in the narrative, such as Pilate's question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Matt. 27:11)? Such problems as these indicate how inadvisable it is to follow the practice of capitalizing pronouns.

Another modernism introduced rather recently in printed Bibles is the use of red ink for the words of Christ. The first such New Testament was the King James Version edited by Louis Klopsch and issued by the Christian Herald (New York) in 1899; it was reprinted many times. During the 20th century other publishers have issued a variety of other versions in this manner. Besides passages in the Gospels, such editions, of course, also print in red the sayings attributed to Christ in the Book of Acts, 2 Corinthians, and Revelation. Difficulties arise in ascertaining the end of a conversation; in John 3 do the words of Jesus end at verse 15 or at verse 21?

The advisability of the practice can be debated. On the one

hand a different color of ink may assist the reader to find more quickly certain familiar passages. On the other hand printing the words of Christ in red not only violates the unity of the text, but also seems to lay a greater emphasis on the report of what Jesus said (as a teacher) than on what He did (as the Savior).

Another difficulty confronts translators today because of the inability of modern English to differentiate between "you" singular number and "you" plural number. In earlier days "thou" and "ye," with the objective forms "thee" and "you," could represent exactly the Hebrew or Greek text. Today it is necessary to indicate in a footnote (as the NRSV does) that the Greek word for "you" is plural in Luke 14:24; John 1:51; 3:11-12; 4:20-21; and 1 Timothy 6:21, even though in each case the words just before are spoken to an individual. In other contexts that mention several persons, a footnote indicates that the word "you" is singular in number (e.g., Phile. 4-21).

CONCLUSION

One time at a meeting of his diocesan clergy, Richard Whately (1787-1863), the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, astonished his hearers when he held up a copy of the Authorized Version of the Bible and said, "Never forget, gentlemen, that this is *not* the Bible." Then, after a moment's pause, he continued, "This, gentlemen, is only a translation of the Bible."¹⁶

What should one say about Whately's pronouncement? From one point of view he was no doubt correct. But from another point of view one must also recognize the truth in what the translators of the King James Version forthrightly declared in the preface to their rendering:

We do not deny, nay we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English, set forth by men of our profession, . . . containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God. As the King's speech, which he uttereth in Parliament, being translated into French, Dutch, Italian and Latin, is still the King's speech, though it be not interpreted by every translator with the like grace, nor peradventure so fitly for phrase, nor so expressly for sense, everywhere.... No cause therefore why the word translated should be denied to be the word, or forbidden to be current, notwithstanding that some imperfections and blemishes may be noted in the setting forth of it.¹⁷

¹⁶ Reported by Henry Solly, "These Eighty Years," or, *The Story of an Unfinished Life* (London: Simpkin & Martall, 1893), 2:81.

¹⁷ *The Translators to the Reader; Preface to the King James Version 1611*, 28-29.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary

3909 Swiss Ave.

Dallas, TX 75204

www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu