Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 4: Translation

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Introduction to Translation

The basis of interpretation is a good translation. Text of the Old and New Testament is established through textual criticism that we discussed last session. Through the process of textual criticism out of all the manuscripts some of them with various variants and different ratings one works backwards to establish what most likely was the original text, the exact wording of it. Then based on that, the next part of the process the next phase of the process of transmission is translation into the language of the modern day reader. Again text criticism establishes from all the manuscript evidence the original text in Hebrew and Greek. Then the next step in the process of transmission is translation into modern day languages. But there are a number of questions raised in discussing translation. What makes a good translation? What are the principles that are utilized to produce translation? What types of translations are available? What translation should I be using? What role does translation play in hermeneutics? The purpose of this session is not to necessarily defend any one translation but to introduce you to the philosophy of translation and again what role translation plays in hermeneutics and interpretation. We will also talk a little bit about gender trends in translation. One of the translations in vogue are gender inclusive or gender neutral translations as they are often called. We’ll talk a little bit about those and the philosophy that that lies behind that. What makes a good translation, and what one should I use in interpretation?

Theories of Translation

The first thing is to understand what translation is. Basically, at its most simple form, translation is simply the transference of a message from one language to another. The original language that one is translating from is using the called the “source language”. The language that is being translated into for our purposes it would be English or whatever language you speak. The modern day language is what is known as
the “receptor language”. Then in between you have the message. So translation then is translating a message from a source language for our purposes that would be Hebrew and Greek and translating that message from the source language into the receptor language which is for our purposes the modern day language that you speak whether English or whatever other language.

There are a number of theories about how that is done. Usually the theories revolve around whether a priority is given to the source language or whether priority is given to the receptor language. That is do I give priority to the Hebrew and Greek text and the form of the text or do I give priority to the modern day receptor language such as English which I am translating into. For example, a focus on the source language the focus on the source text usually is associated with and results in more literal types of translations. The goal in this type of translation is to focus on the source language which again for our purposes is Hebrew and Greek. The goal is to usually reproduce as closely as possible the language and the structure and the form of the original language even if at times it sounds awkward and wooden and stilted in the receptor language. The goal again is to preserve as closely as possible the form and the structure of the source languages, again Hebrew and Greek. This is often known also as a formal equivalent translation or a formal equivalent philosophy of producing a translation. It focuses on producing as much as possible the exact form of the source text. In other words it’s willing at times to sacrifice understanding and clarity in the receptor text in order to preserve as closely as possible the form of, the structure of, the wording of, the length of the sentences of the source text, again, for our purposes Greek and Hebrew. Modern day examples of this might be the NASB the New American Standard or the NRSV is a classic example of a more formal equivalent type of translation a translation that focuses on source text, and the source language.

The other kind of competing theory or philosophy or translation focuses not on the source text but on the receptor text. Usually these types of translations have a more contemporary sound to them when they are read. The goal of a translation that focuses on
the receptor text is to reproduce the message of the source text even if not the form and structure at least to produce the message in a way that will be understood by the modern reader or those who are reading in their receptor language. The focus is more on the receptors and the receptor language. Will the modern day reader for whom I’m producing this translation will they as accurately and as closely as possible understand the message of the source text. This translation is quite willing to sacrifice the form and the structure and the exact wording and the form of the source text in order to communicate as clearly as possible in the language of the receptor. This is often known as a dynamic equivalent type of translation. The goal is to get the modern reader to respond. I should say that most who follow this philosophy translation that focuses on the receptor language do not do so with the idea or intention that of abandoning the source text. The goal is to try to reproduce the meaning as closely as possible but in a way that will be understood by the receptors and by the receptor language. So the goal is that modern readers will respond to the text in an equivalent way, in the same way emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually that the first readers would have responded to the source text. That requires in this philosophy of translation introducing certain changes that is, changing it in a way that will be understandable by the majority of contemporary readers so that they will respond in a similar way. Again it is to reproduce an equivalent response in the receptors as those who have originally read the text. It is quite willing to change the structure, the wording, the length of sentences, it’s willing to sacrifice the form and other things in their source text so that the readers will be able to understand it and respond to it in an equivalent way. So they sacrifice form for meaning. One example of a thorough dynamic equivalent translation is the Today’s English Version or the TEV.

There are other examples of translations that focus on more of the receptor language or are dynamic equivalent. There are also, one could quibble over this but there are some who would even distinguish from dynamic equivalent translations go a step further and look at or those New and Old Testament texts that could be labeled a
paraphrase such as Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* or traditionally the Living Bible or the New Living Bible are often placed in this category of paraphrase.

Rather than seeing these as opposite translations theories it’s probably more helpful to place them on ends of a spectrum. Instead of simply opposite self-contained theories there is a place for more dynamic equivalent approaches and formal equivalent approaches. Again dynamic approaches that focus on the receptor language the modern language as strive for understandably and intelligibly and those formal equivalent that focus more on the source text try to reproduce the form and instead of seeing them as two opposite or opposed translation theories that are sealed off from each other. It is better to see them standing on opposite ends of the spectrum from more formal to more equivalent. In fact, I would argue that a completely formal equivalent approach is impossible. Every translation is, in some respects, an interpretation of the biblical text. So a completely literal translation is in my opinion theoretically impossible and practically impossible as well. So it’s better to see them on opposite ends of the spectrum as translations that tend more to the focus on the source text and that are formally equivalent and other translations that tend more towards dynamic equivalence focusing more on the receptor text.

The number in between in my opinion an example although it is usually often a considered dynamic equivalent but I think an example that tries to balance the two approaches that fall somewhere in between whether it does so successfully can be debated but would be the NIV especially the 2011 updated version of the NIV. It is actually, by their own admission, an attempt to balance the formal and dynamic equivalent maybe a little bit more towards the dynamic side of that spectrum. Again my purpose is not to defend one these perspectives or to defend a particular translation, though I think there is much to be said for dynamic equivalent type translations and what the NIV is doing. My attempt is not to defend a particular translation as much as to introduce you to the philosophies that lie behind translations so you know what is going
Observations on Translation Theories

Instead, I simply want to make a number of observations related to translation by way of evaluating translations and understanding what they are and what they do and your ability to utilize them. First of all as I’ve already mentioned there’s no such thing in my opinion as a completely literal translation. The reason for this is linguistic because no two languages are identical. Although languages do overlap and there are similarities and that’s what makes translation possible but on the other hand there is no such thing as a completely literal translation. No two languages completely overlap. No two languages are identical. Since this is the case, a strictly literal translation is impossible. Again, even words that overlap in meaning are not completely identical words and aren’t even spelled the same. Even a word that is in English that is equivalent to a Hebrew word has different letters and even different numbers and letters and are obviously spelled very differently. Their meanings usually overlap but are usually never completely identical. Languages have different structures. Something that Hebrew or Greek does grammatically English doesn’t or does in a very different way. So there is no equivalent overlap between languages, so that a completely literal translation in my opinion is impossible. In fact, if I were to strive for a rather wooden, I prefer the word “wooden” to “literal,” usually if I were to strive for a completely wooden translation, that is if Hebrew or Greek has a word or a certain construction I will reproduce that exactly in English, usually the result is often nonsense. That’s because the two languages don’t ever lap.

Let me give you an example. This is from a rather wooden word for word following the words in the Greek text and following the grammatical structure construction in the Greek text with the closest equivalent in English. Here is a rather wooden translation of Colossians 3:17 “And all what anything if you do in word or in
work all in name of Lord Jesus.” Now some of that you picked up on and maybe you caught the general sense of the whole thing but much of it is rather awkward and unintelligible if I am to translate it woodenly, which is how I just did it. However, to give just one example from the NIV, and that’s just because it’s the translation I have at hand right now, you could use a number of others. But here is how the NIV has handled Colossians 3:17 it says, “And in whatever you do whether in word or deed do all in the name of Lord Jesus Christ.” This makes a lot more sense. So you see its actually sacrificed a little bit of the strict grammar and wording in order to preserve more accurately the meaning while still maintaining some of the grammatical texture of the text itself. But the point was to demonstrate a precise and completely wooden or literal type of translation often miscommunicates or fails to communicate anything to the readers in the receptor language.

Another example, this is from Mathew 13: 4. The well-known Parable of the Sower and Mathew’s version of it as spoken by Jesus in introducing it a very wooden almost word for word translation finding the closest formal and literal equivalent in English to the wording and grammar of the Greek text would sound something like this perhaps “And into the sow to him which on the one had fell by the way.” Tell me what that means. The difficulty is because there are a couple of ways that the English words have been combined are not acceptable in English where as they may have been in Greek. So “And in the to sow” and “to sow” meaning “to sow seed” “And in the to sow him which on the one had fell by the way.” Now chapter 13 verse 4 again this is just one example from the NIV how that has been clarified “As he was scattering the seed” or “as he was sowing the seed, some fell along the path” which again is an attempt to still follow the order of the Greek text as close as possible but to use appropriate English constructions that are equivalent to, as closely as possible, the Greek ones. I will use these as examples to demonstrate that a literal wooden translation often is not the best and frequently risks being misunderstood or not understood at all. Furthermore, as I said
a completely literal translation it is actually an impossibility because no two languages completely overlap.

The second observation I want to make is that every translation is an interpretation, period. No matter what you hear and I still hear people saying that a certain translation is neutral, it doesn’t interpret, it’s not an interpretation. Some translations are discredited because they’re interpretations where other translations are preferred because they are not interpretations. The difficulty is no matter how wooden even the examples I just read for Mathew 13 and from Colossians 3, no matter how wooden every translation is an interpretation.

One well known New Testament scholar I was talking to told me, some may think this goes too far perhaps, but perhaps overstating but he told me that every translation is commentary on the biblical text in disguise. What he was trying to get at is what I think we were saying in some degree: every translation is an interpretation. Again some may interrupt more than others but it is impossible to produce a translation that is not an interpretation on the biblical text.

So for example, if I’m going to use an English word I’ll just talk about the word level for this example. If I’m going to use an English word, “man,” to translate the Hebrew word *adam* first of all I have to know what the Hebrew word *adam* means, that is I have to interrupt it. I also have to know what the English word man means to make sure that’s an appropriate English word to translate *adam*. I can’t use the word “tree” or I can’t choose any other word I want I have to know what the Hebrew word means and then I have to find the appropriate English word. I have to know what that means so that I can determine if that’s an appropriate word to use, that is interpretation. That’s why I say every translation is an interpretation. Or again, if the Greek text that I’m translating has a certain grammatical construction I have to interrupt that correctly and accurately in order to know what English construction to use. Therefore I have to interpret and understand the meaning of the English construction to know if that is an accurate and adequate
construction to use to represent the Greek. So interpretation no matter how wooden I want to be even if I want to be very wooden and use a word for word I still have to interpret the Greek and Hebrew text in my own language to determine whether I’m going to use this word or this construction to translate and represent this meaning and this construction in the Hebrew or Greek text. So again, every translation is an interpretation.

So again, for example, Genesis 1:1 how do I know that the English word “heavens,” just to use a very simple example, how do I know that this is a good English word or even an accurate or a bad word to use for interpreting *shamaim*. I have to know the meaning of that Hebrew word in that context and I have to know the meaning of the English word “heavens” in order to make sure it’s a good fit. Or Galatians 5 when Paul contrasts the spirit with the flesh actually for the Greek word that “flesh” is usually used to translate is *sarx*. But again I have to know what *sarx* means I can’t just randomly use the word “flesh.” I have to know what the word *sarx* means in order to find the appropriate English word. Then, again, I have to know the meaning of that word to know that it is an accurate and suitable word to use in order to translate the Greek word *sarx*. So every translation is to some degree an interpretation; no matter how literally you are trying to translate or how wooden you are trying to be. So again when someone says I don’t like this translation because it is an interpretation this is not an interpretation it’s a translation has probably misunderstood things because every translation is inevitably an interpretation of the biblical text.

A third thing in thinking in terms of translation is that translations usually give priority to the spoken language over the written. That is because most translations are meant to be read and heard. Think about it, in other words, translations are not primarily produced for scholars. Most people that read them are persons sitting in a worship service in the pews or the chairs of our churches, sanctuaries or auditoriums on Sunday mornings or whenever your church meets. Most persons are hearing it read, they are hearing it spoken. So most translations are often geared for the hearing, and often what that means
is that sometimes translations will be geared towards eliminating offensive sounding translations, etc.

For example, a very good example that is probably true at the spoken as well as the written level is the fact that the older King James Version would include the word “ass” when referring to a donkey. That now has been removed because, at least in modern day English, to have that word spoken someone might read it, especially if you are raised with reading the King James Version or if you are raised with biblical jargon, you might be used to that. But if that word is utilized in a congregation in modern day for many not biblically trained or not used to reading or hearing the Bible, something like that may sound offensive. So a lot of translations today are geared towards the spoken over the written and will often give priority to how something will sound when it is written, though again perhaps that is not true for every translation.

The fourth observation to make about translations is that translations, again I’m just making observations not so much evaluating them. The fourth thing is most translations are written to be understood by the majority of the audience for which they are intended. That takes into consideration the readership level, the social economic level of the majority of readers who it’s intended. For example, just to utilize the NIV as an example. It is aimed at about a 5th or 6th grade reading level because that reflects the majority of the readers and listeners of that text will be operating at that level. As opposed for example to a translation that might be produced for academics or scholars it might operate at a different level. Translations are usually meant, especially dynamic equivalent translations, to be understood by the majority of the readers for whom it is produced.

Number five, in my opinion though is translations still must strive to retain a sense that one is still reading a foreign document. It is possible to update a translation to such a degree that one feels that one is reading a document that was produced in the twenty first century. For example, when Jerusalem is all of a sudden translated or becomes
Philadelphia or Atlanta, Georgia or Sacramento, California or something like that or it is updated to become a modern day city as where Babylon is updated to become Las Vegas or something like that. However that might gain it seems to me at times though that some of those are extreme examples are sacrificing the fact that I’m dealing with a document that was not written in the twenty first century. So while one might strive for a document that is understandable to the receptors, at the same time it still must retain a sense that one is reading a document that was written in a century two millennia or more removed form my modern day context and situation. To update a text that sounds like it was produced in a twenty-first century context, culture and time is probably to sacrifice something at the expense of making it sound contemporary.

The sixth observation I want to say about translations is regarding observations about translations and what they are and what they do is that new translations or updating translations is a necessity. There is no such thing as a final translation or the official translation of the New or Old Testament. The reason for that is not that the Bible changes, although sometimes we may find going back to text criticism we may find documents or information that will help us produce a more accurate text at least in viewing the details here and there. The reason is not so much the source language changes but the receptor language changes. Because modern day language changes because “ass” in the twenty-first century does not mean what it did in the sixteenth century. Another modern day example is the word “gay” in the twenty-first century does not mean what it did back in the twentieth century or early nineteenth century. It is because of that our translations have to change. Especially if we are focused on a dynamic equivalent type of translations or at least we are striving to produce a balance between translations that capture the original text yet still will communicate accurately to modern day readers because languages change it is necessarily to continually update. Not so much always in a wide scale manner but at least to revise and rethink our translations.

**Gender and Translation**
In light of all this I want to spend just a little bit of time talking about gender translations and how that relates to this and then we’ll go back and gather all this information together. I want to talk just little bit about what role does translation play in the process of hermeneutics and interpretation. But again to review before we talk about gender translations again. Translations range over a scale from more formal equivalent where the goal of the translation is to reproduce as closely as possible the original form, grammatical structure, and wording. Again, that is impossible to do completely and exhaustibly because languages simply do not completely overlap. There is no one to one correspondence between the source language and my receptor language. So again that is why we said these philosophies of these translations are to be seen on a sliding scale. But formal equivalent translations tend to focus on more of the source text reproducing as closely as possible the grammatical structure, the wording, even sometimes sacrificing understandably and clarity in order to capture and retain the structure of the source text.

On the other end of the spectrum, we said are dynamic equivalent translations that focus more on understanding the source text not completely obliterating or doing away with it but trying to understand the messages communicated but making sure that it is understood in the receptor language by the majority of readers of that text. The goal is to reproduce an equivalent response in the readers of the receptor language as the original readers would have responded intellectually, physiologically and emotionally to the original text.

Let me say no translation, because no languages are identical, can hope to completely capture with exhaustive of accuracy the meaning of the original text. Instead, the question is whether the translation is an accurate and an adequate reproduction and reflection of the original text. By the way, just as an aside at least in my opinion, one can ask the question on how one’s translations relate to inspiration? Inspiration refers to the original text so I would conclude that modern made translations can be labeled as “virtually” inspired in that they are accurate and adequate if not exhaustibly and
perfectly, at least substantially and adequately if they are adequate and accurate reproductions and representations of the original text of the Old and New Testament.

So we have the scale from the more formal equivalent to dynamic equivalent translations. Translations that try to balance translations can fall on that scale of more formal and dynamic equivalent types. One issue that especially dynamic equivalent translations raise is an issue that is kind of encouraged today and that is the issue of gender translations, what some have called “gender neutral” translations or “gender inclusive” translations. I think the words “gender inclusive” translation is a little more accurate. Gender neutral seems to be suggesting taking gender out all together making reference to gender neutral whereas a gender exclusive suggests where the biblical text is clearly referring to both male and female, one makes that clear in the receptor language. So if the Greek and Hebrew language are clearly referring to male and female then in my modern day language that will also be clearer in the biblical text, so gender inclusive or gender neutral translations.

The issue behind it is this, in both Greek and Hebrew and if you’ve ever studied other languages especially if you are an English speaker this is often where other languages are very different than English. Greek and Hebrew, like a number of other languages like German and Spanish, etc, will have gender built into the language. That is, certain words will actually be classified as either masculine or feminine. Some words again to take Greek, which is my area of specialty and interest, some words will have endings on them or will have a character that is a form that is masculine. Others will have a form that is feminine. Some words are naturally masculine and feminine. For example, the word *anthropos* or “man” is naturally going to be masculine. The word for “woman” or female *gune* will naturally be feminine because it is referring to females. But there are other words in languages like that that don’t seem at least for first century readers, to have any connection between the words and gender. For example, the Greek word for “sea” or “ocean” is feminine. There doesn’t seem to be any connection as if there is some feminine quality in the ocean or sea. There may have been in history but I’m convinced
that most first century readers who were Greek would have no idea why the word that we translate as sea or ocean was feminine. The Greek word for “word” or “speech” *logos* is masculine yet I’m not sure that there is any natural connection between that and the masculine gender. So some words in the languages are just arbitrary seem to be feminine or masculine.

Others seem to have a closer connection. The word for “woman” naturally or the word for “daughter” is naturally going to be feminine. The word for “husband” or “man” or “male” is naturally going to have a masculine form or masculine endings to them. Again, if you’ve studied a language that has gender most again with Greek and Hebrew certain words are either masculine or feminine, that is sometimes that’s just the way they did it. The difficulty is in a language such as English, that doesn’t have gender in the language, gender endings that are masculine or feminine or forms of words that are masculine or feminine, that can be tricky translating from one language that does that to another. This gets us to the heart of the problem sometimes Greek and Hebrew could use a masculine word, a word with a masculine form and use it to refer to both males and females. The question is when that happens even though Greek and Hebrew use a masculine form like “he” or “man” especially if it’s using the word “man” and it is clearly referring to all of humanity, both male and female. Is it appropriate to do that in the receptor language? Again, I’ll use the example from the English translation. That is if Greek or Hebrew uses a masculine pronoun that could be translated as “he” or “him” or something like that, is it appropriate to use “he” or “him” in an English translation? Or if the Hebrew or Greek uses the word that we usually translate “man,” is it appropriate to use the word “man” in the English translation? The question is if Hebrew and Greek are using a masculine term that clearly refers to both male and female in English should we make that more clear? That is, if in English I use the word “he,” or “him” or “man,” when the biblical text is clearly referring to both male and female even though they’ve used masculine language, if I used masculine language will I be misunderstood in translating it that way? If I use the word “man” will the majority of female readers think they are
excluded from the text thinking it’s only referring to men? If I use the word “him” or “he” when the biblical text is clearly referring to male and female will I be misunderstood? Will I lead readers to think that only males are being referred to and excluding females?

Not everyone agrees with that question but I think more and more many are starting to agree that we need to at least think about how we translate masculine language again. In Greek and Hebrew the Greek word for “man,” *anthropos*, could be used to refer to men or a male but it also could be used to refer to humanity referring to all people, males and females. In English if I used the word “man” to translate *anthropos* not when *anthropos* is being used as males and men but when it is being used to refer to females and males, all of humanity, if I use the word “man” in those kinds of contexts will I be misunderstood? Or should I use another word in the English translation to capture the fact that there are both male and female. So sometimes you will find gender inclusive translations when *anthropos* in Greek the word that we often translate “man” in English refers to both males and females. What might be more appropriate? You’ll find some English translations using the word “people” instead of “man.” By using the word “people” then it just makes it clear to the modern reader that the Greek and Hebrew were referring to both males and females. What if I use the word “man” every time *anthropos* occurred even when I was referring to male and female if I used the word “man” in English will I cause misunderstanding? Will I cause people to think that only men are being referred to.

The same thing occurs with “he” or “she”. In Hebrew and Greek pronouns are masculine then we would translate “he” and “him” in English but it is clearly referring to male and female then it is legitimate in English to translate in a way that makes that clear. It all depends on whether, at least one of the main issues, there are other issues involved but one of the main issues is whether the English now uses “men” or “man” and “he” or “him” only to refer to males and never to females. Someone argued that’s the case and therefore we need to be careful that when the Old Testament clearly
refers to both male and women we need to make that clear in our English translation so that it will not be understood. The question is again should we avoid misunderstanding? Should we try to reproduce the exact form? There might be other reasons for preserving the masculine language in Greek and Hebrew or should we strive for understanding and communicating accurately and change the masculine language in English to make sure that the readers will be clear that females are included as well. So sometimes “him” and “he” are turned into “they.” You could put a slash between “he” and “she” but that gets kind of awkward over long periods of texts. But often you will find “him” and “he” turned to “they” or “them” or something like that in English translations to make clear that it is not exclusive to males.

Now let me make clear that at least for most evangelicals this is not an issue of pushing some feminist agenda that is trying to make the entire Bible feminine sounding and feminine inclusive or gender neutral. Instead, the issue is if the Old and New Testament text clearly intend to include male and female, then why not make that clear in the English translation. But, on the other hand, those who follow this type of translation would admit only men are intended then that needs to be left intact in the translation. So it’s not wherever you find masculine language in the Old and New Testament change it to become neutral or inclusive that’s not the issue. The issue if there is masculine language in the Greek and Hebrew Bible but it’s clearly in the context clearly intending a reference to male and female then that should be made clear in the New and Old Testament translations. So again things like changing pronouns that are usually translated to “he” and “him” to “them” or “they” changing the word “man” to “person” or “people,” again when it’s clearly referring to both genders, changing the word “son” to “sons and daughters” or perhaps “children.” Again only when the word “son” clearly in the context is intending to include children of both genders then the change is made. But if the word “son” in the context clearly it is referring only to sons of the male gender then that needs to be kept intact and made clear that is what is being referred to. You see again the issue is often one of meaning. If the masculine language in
the Hebrew and Greek clearly refers to males then that needs to clear or retained in the English translation. If the masculine language is refereeing to males and females then gender inclusive language changes in the receptor text communicates a way to make that clear by using language that is gender inclusive.

Again, it needs to be said that this is, at least for most evangelicals, not an attempt to push a feminist agenda or tamper with the biblical text but it’s a call for clarity and accuracy according to most who advocate gender neutral translations and are calling for increased understanding. It’s interesting too that most of the genders supporters that I know who argue for gender neutral translations are not actually not egalitarians when it comes to the issue of women in ministry, whether women should have a identical roles and functions as ordained pastors and ministers in the church. It is interesting a lot of them are not egalitarians but many are more hierarchical or complementarians as they would see a distinction between male and female. Some of those people are the most ardent supporters of gender inclusive translations. On the opposite end some would interestingly say “But the New Testament uses the word ‘man’” for example this is something I often hear, “The New Testament often uses the word ‘man’ so English has to use the same word? The New Testament doesn’t use the word ‘man.’” the New Testament uses the word for example, *anthropos*, a Greek word. The question again is what is meant by that word? If what is meant by that word is male or man then that’s the word we need to use in English. If what is meant by that is human beings both male and female then maybe “people” or “peoples” or another word would more accurately capture the meaning.

To give you a couple of examples, and again I’m not using these examples to support or argue for political correctness, I’m just using examples that are often pointed to demonstrate what is at stake. I’m not arguing for the correctives of these examples or necessarily you’ll buy into them, although I think they are good examples and reflections of what is going on. For example, in the Old Testament in Psalm chapter one this is the NIV version, “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the council of the wicked or stand
in the way of sinners or sit in the sea of mockers.” A more gender neutral translation and interestingly this was the original NIV, “Blessed is the man” the new 2011 version of the NIV says “Blessed is the one” because their rational is that this is not just addressed to men but this is addressed to anyone who falls within this category. So they’ve changed it to make this clear and so “blessed is the man” which is presumably the committee thought that some might read this to be restricted to males in order to make it clear they changed it. Instead of translating “man” they’ve translated “blessed is the one” to be more inclusive.

Another interesting example comes from Hebrew 2:6. This is another one that could be debated but I only use these translations as examples of how a gender neutral translation works and some of the questions that it is trying to ask. In Hebrews 2 the author is exalting or extolling the son, Jesus Christ, as the ultimate and climatic mode of God’s revelation to his people. As the author says in chapter 1, “in these last days God has spoken in his Son.” The rest of chapters 1 and 2 go on to exalt the son especially to show that the son is superior over the angels. The reason I think he does that is because the angels would have been associated with the covenant and the giving of the Mosaic Law and so by showing that Jesus is superior to the angels the author can show Jesus is superior to the old covenant means of revelation. It’s the climax or the fulfillment of that. One of the ways he does that in chapter 2 in verse 6 I’ll back up and read verse 5 where the author says, “Is it not to angels that God has subjected the world to come about which we were speaking, but there is a place where someone has said” and that is kind of an interesting way of introducing an Old Testament quote but the author of Hebrews does that frequently. But what comes next is an Old Testament quotation again I’m reading from the original NIV “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him” which is a quotation from Psalms 8. I won’t go back and read Psalm 8 but this is the author quoting from Psalm 8 is sort of the psalmist’s praise for the climax of God’s creative activity in human beings. It is sort of a poetic praise and response to the creation narrative from Genesis 1 and 2. But now interestingly the author of Hebrews 2
applies it to Jesus Christ. So again the original NIV says, I’m just using this as an example you can find other translations that would translate it similarly, “What is man that you are mindful of him the son of man that you are mindful of him.” I want you to notice that masculine language, “What is man that you care for him, what is the son of man that you are mindful of him” notice the masculine language. This however this is the translation for the New Revised Standard Version, the NRS. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them or mortals that you care for them?” Notice the change from “man” to “human beings” and “son of man” to “mortals” and the “him” to “them.” Now at first glance this could be seen as a distortion of the biblical text and that the translators of the NRSV have tried to tamper with the text or promote a gender or be more gender friendly or neutral but therefore have distorted it. Furthermore, some especially if you are attuned to reading the Gospels where “Son of Man” is the most frequent title Jesus uses to refer to himself. One could be upset with or conclude that this is an illegitimate translation.

It is important to look at the context to determine why the author or why the translators of the NRSV have done it this way? Why have they substituted “human beings” for “man”? Why have they substituted “mortals” for “son of man” from the translation like the NIV? The main issue is that in Hebrews 2 the author of Hebrews seems to be demonstrating that Jesus Christ is the representative of all of humanity. If you read the rest of chapter 2, the emphasis is not on Jesus’ maleness that he is a man but the emphasis is that he is a human being who represents all of humanity, male and female.

Furthermore, I would suspect the translators of NASV have interrupted Psalm 8 in the same way as extolling God’s creation, not of Adam or males, but of humanity so they’re taking those together because they’ve understood Psalm 8 to be praising God’s creation of humanity. Jesus in Hebrews 2 is representing all of creation, all of humanity therefore they’ve made that clear by changing “what is man,” to “what is humanity,” “what are human beings,” the pinnacle of God’s creation that Jesus now represents. Now
what is the son of man? What are mortals? Jesus now takes weakened mortal human beings the pinnacle of God’s creation and now representing all of humanity he brings them to their intended destiny, as the author and finisher of our faith.

What humanity failed to achieve now Jesus Christ achieves by bringing them to their true intentions. Therefore the NRSV has made it clear that Jesus is not just representing males, the focus in Hebrews is not Jesus as a male, the focus is Jesus representing all of humanity and fulfilling Psalm 8 as extolling human beings as the pinnacle of God’s creation but they’ve failed to achieve what God intended. Now Jesus Christ the human being does achieve God’s intention for humanity. Therefore, for text like that the NRSV has made it clear by using more inclusive language.

In the next session, we will wrap up our discussion of gender neutral translations and we will also talk a little about the role translation plays in interpretation, and what translation should you use in hermeneutics and interpretation, or is there a correct one, and what roles should they play?

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