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Eenie, Meenie, Miney, Moe... Can It Work for Bibles?

MARK A. THRONTVEIT

Translations are so much more enjoyable than originals, because they contain many things that the originals leave out.

—Ephraim Speiser¹

Confused by the alphabet soup of RSV, KJV, NRSV, TEV, NJB, CEV, NIV, REB, etc., that confronts you in the Bible section of your bookseller?² Nostalgic for the good old days when choosing a Bible meant deciding between a King James Version in black leather and a red leather Revised Standard Version? Spending more time in your Bible studies arguing about different translations than discussing what God has to say? You are not alone! Never before have we had so many different translations from which to choose. David Daniell, after doing the math in his

¹Ephraim Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) lxiv, quoting “a gentle critic.”

²The following abbreviations will be used in this article: Common English Bible (CEB, 2011), Contemporary English Version (CEV, 1995), English Standard Version (ESV, 2001), Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB, 2004), Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (TNK, 1985), King James Version (KJV, 1611), Living Bible (LB, 1971), New American Bible (NAB, 1991), New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1995), New English Translation (NET, 2001), New International Version (NIV, 1978), New Living Translation (NLT, 1996), New Jerusalem Bible (NJB, 1985), New King James Version (NKJV, 1982), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989), Revised English Bible (REB, 1989), Revised Standard Version (RSV, 1957), The Message (TM, 2003), Today’s English Version (TEV, 1976).

How does one choose among the vast number of English translations of the Bible now available? Most important, of course, is to read any translation; but then it is important to know what kind of translation it aims to be, whether it is appropriate for the intended use, and what its biases are. Comparing several translations will bring even more insight.

massive 900-page tome, claims, “Over twelve hundred new translations into English of the Bible, or parts of it, were made from the original Hebrew and Greek between 1945 and 1990. Thirty-five were fresh translations of the whole Bible, and eighty were fresh translations of the New Testament alone.”³

In the twenty-one years since, even more translations have appeared in addition to a spate of “specialty Bibles” that are not translations at all but Bibles that augment standard translations with introductions and notes that provide a particular way of reading, interpreting, or applying the text for targeted audiences. I’m thinking here of such notables as the *Backpacker’s Bible* and the *Surfers Bible* (whose targeted audiences are self-explanatory); the *Ancient Faith Bible* (whose targeted audience is less clear); the *Lutheran Study Bible* (ELCA; with Paul’s words in red [just kidding]), *The Lutheran Study Bible* (LCMS; with more words identified as Paul’s), *The Jewish Study Bible* (with none of Paul’s words), and *The Catholic Study Bible* (with even more Bible).

WHY SO MANY BIBLES?

So what accounts for this bumper crop of Bibles? Wycliffe and Tyndale are remembered for their pioneering work in producing, respectively, the first complete English translation, from Jerome’s Latin Vulgate (ca. 1380–1382), and the first printed New Testament, from Erasmus’s Greek New Testament (1526).⁴ Both were highly motivated to bring the word of God to the people in their own language, Middle English for Wycliffe, early Modern English for Tyndale. That they were declared heretic, strangled, and burned at the stake suggests the Roman Church’s somewhat negative reaction to their work. The subsequent decision at the Council of Constance in 1415, ultimately carried out in 1428, to exhume Wycliffe, burn him again, and cast his ashes on the River Swift in Lutterworth further attests the zeal of the establishment and may account for the relative absence of biblical translation until the time of King James.

Following its appearance in 1611, the King James Version that we honor in this issue of *Word & World* experienced eighty years of theological and scholarly critique, usually in negative comparisons with the popular Geneva Bible of 1560.⁵ It survived these attacks, however, and virtually held sway as the preeminent English version until the nineteenth century, when motivations other than providing God’s word for God’s people became important and led to a series of revisions of the KJV.⁶

³D. Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 764.

⁴See Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999) 282–292.

⁵L. A. Weigle, “English Versions since 1611,” in *Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963–1970) 3:168.

⁶Including: the Revised Version (RV, 1885), the American Standard Version (ASV, 1901), the Revised Standard Version (RSV, 1952), the New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1971), the King James II Version (KJII, 1971), the New King James Version (NKJV, 1982), and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989).

Chief among these motivations was the discovery of earlier and arguably more reliable Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and the consequent development of textual criticism as a means of reconstructing close approximations of the original autographs. J. P. Lewis notes tellingly, “The King James scholars could have known fewer than twenty-five late manuscripts of the New Testament, and these were carelessly used. Today there are 5,358 known New Testament manuscripts and fragments....The 1611 situation for the Old Testament was even poorer.”⁷ For example, the so-called “Longer Ending of Mark” (Mark 16:9–20), with which that Gospel concludes in the KJV, is now recognized as a late second or early third century C.E. addition not found in the earliest manuscripts. As a result, modern versions of Mark’s Gospel end with “for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8), a decision that radically alters one’s reading of the earliest Gospel.

change and development in the English language itself over the last four hundred years make new translations inevitable as Elizabethan words and phrases fall out of common usage or change in meaning

With regard to the Old Testament, deeper understanding of Hebrew vocabulary, syntax, and poetic style due to insights gleaned from the study of Ugaritic and other Semitic languages and the cultures that produced them also demonstrates the need for an ongoing process of translation. For instance, the appearance of a legendary patriarch “Danel” in the Ugaritic texts may identify the otherwise unknown “Daniel” found in Ezek 14:14, 20; 28:3.

Finally, change and development in the English language itself over the last four hundred years make new translations inevitable as Elizabethan words and phrases fall out of common usage or change in meaning.⁸ An example of the latter might be Deut 14:2 (KJV), “For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a *peculiar* people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth” (italics added), where “peculiar” means “that which belongs to only one person”—in this case, the Lord. In our idiom, far from being God’s own possession, “peculiar people” are, well, “two teats shy of an udder.”

The combination of obsolete words and unfamiliar phraseology in the venerable KJV continues to mystify readers with such impenetrable verses as (italics added):

Moreover, brethren, we *do you to wit* of the grace of God (2 Cor 8:1 KJV)
cf. We *want you to know*, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God
(NRSV)

⁷J. P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 42.

⁸Five such obsolete words are “almug” (1 Kings 10:12), “chode” (Num 20:3), “neesed” (2 Kings 4:35), “purtenance” (Exod 12:9), and “bruit” (Jer 10:22). For literally hundreds more, see R. Bridges and L. A. Weigle, *The Bible Word Book: Concerning Obsolete and Archaic Words in the King James Version of the Bible* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1960).

not to boast in another man's line of things made ready to our hand (2 Cor 10:16 KJV)

cf. not boast of work already done in another person's area (NET)

The God of my mercy shall *prevent* me (Ps 59:10 KJV)

cf. My faithful God *will come to aid* me (TNK)

FORMAL, FUNCTIONAL, AND NOW OPTIMAL EQUIVALENCY

Important as these considerations are, the driving force behind the current explosion in English translations of the Bible is a dramatic shift in the theoretical understanding of what translation is. Wycliffe, Luther, and Tyndale all agreed that the goal of translating the Bible into the language of the people was to reproduce the biblical text as faithfully as possible. But, what does "faithfully" mean? How does one produce a "faithful" translation? These days, there are two rather different answers to this pesky question:

1. *Word-for-word*

One way of being faithful to the original text is to translate each Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic word by one English equivalent. Furthermore, one should try to maintain the sentence structure, verbal nuance, and idioms of the original. Consistent with this principle, the King James Version sets in italics all words not actually in the original text but necessary to complete the sentence in English. For example, the use of "is" in the Old Testament, since Hebrew does not have a verbal equivalent for the present tense of the verb "to be." An early critic of the NIV has succinctly characterized the word-for-word, or formal correspondence approach as it is known in scholarly circles, as being

concerned that paragraph corresponds to paragraph, sentence to sentence, clause to clause, phrase to phrase, and word to word. The formal equivalence philosophy or method of translating attempts to say "what" the original text says by retaining "how" it says it (as far as English grammar allows). Although clear English expression does not always allow the formal equivalence translator to do so, he tries not to adjust the idioms which the original writer used; rather, he attempts to render them more or less literally, so that the reader may be able to perceive something of the way in which the original document employed local linguistic and cultural elements to convey ideas.⁹

2. *Meaning-for-meaning*

Another way of being faithful to the original text is to determine as precisely as possible how the text was understood in its time and then to try to find words, expressions, structures, and idioms that recreate the same effect upon readers today. The American Bible Society's Good News Bible (Today's English Version) was the first exemplar of the meaning-for-meaning approach.¹⁰ This approach is also

⁹Robert P. Martin, *Accuracy of Translation: The Primary Criterion in Evaluating Bible Versions with Special Reference to the New International Version* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989) 8.

¹⁰The classic description comes from Eugene Nida of the American Bible Society. See Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974).

known as *dynamic equivalence*, though this rather “’70s-esque” nomenclature has morphed into *functional equivalence* these days. The TEV Preface describes the procedure in this way:

After ascertaining as accurately as possible the meaning of the original, the translators’ next task was to express that meaning in a manner and form easily understood by the readers. Since this translation is intended for all who use English as a means of communication, the translators have tried to avoid words and forms not in current or widespread use; but no artificial limit has been set to the range of the vocabulary employed. Every effort has been made to use language that is natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous. Consequently there has been no attempt to reproduce in English the parts of speech, sentence structure, word order, and grammatical devices of the original languages. Faithfulness in translation also includes a faithful representation of the cultural and historical features of the original, without any attempt to modernize the text.¹¹

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Perhaps an example will illustrate these two methods. A common Russian phrase might be translated in a word-for-word fashion as “a bear sat on his ear.” Such a translation would be faithful to the Russian language in that each Russian word was translated by its English equivalent. This is not, however, what the phrase means. A meaning-for-meaning translation, striving to elicit “Russian” responses from English listeners, would describe someone lacking in musical ability. An expression such as “can’t carry a tune in a bucket” would better convey the *meaning* of the phrase, even though none of the English equivalents of the Russian words were used. This can easily be seen by comparing the RSV and TEV translations of Ps 45:1 (again, italics added):

My heart overflows with a goodly theme (RSV).

Beautiful words fill *my mind* (TEV).

The Hebrew word under consideration (*libbî*) is the word designating that physical organ which pumps blood through veins and arteries (the “heart”), with a first common singular possessive suffix (“my”). The problem arises when the significance of “my heart” in English and Hebrew is taken into consideration. The heart is associated with feelings, emotion, and sentiment in English, while in Hebrew the heart is the seat of rational decision making, intentionality, and the will. In this instance, I would argue that the functional approach of TEV, which seeks to elicit from the contemporary reader a response or understanding congruent with the original hearer,

¹¹The Preface appears as part of the front matter in the various editions of the TEV (thus, pagination is indefinite). The same is true for the prefaces of other versions referred to in this article.

most faithfully translates this text with “my mind.” The “literal” meaning of an organ that pumps blood is misleading at best.

There are, of course, problems with each approach that offset their strengths. Although the word-for-word translations retain much of the character of the original text, they often suffer from “translationese,” as exemplified in that infamous nugget of Milvahkee-Deutsch, “Let’s throw the horse over the fence some hay.” At least these translations “sound like the Bible,” which many readers actually prefer, especially in worship settings, though often at the expense of understanding. Similarly, the meaning-for-meaning translations tend to be very clear and readers seem to understand what the translation is saying, but that may be because the texts have been more narrowly interpreted; this raises the question of how do readers know that this clear interpretation is what the author intended?

LITERAL SCHMITERAL

One of the factors driving this scholarly split concerns the use of the word “literal” in discussions of Bible reading. Questions such as, “Do you take the Bible literally?” are confusing at best, given the range of meaning ascribed to the word literal and the range of material contained in the Bible. Does the questioner want to know if I read the Bible according to the plain sense of the words, in an unexaggerated fashion, or according to some metaphorical scheme? And which parts of the Bible does the questioner mean? Isaiah 55:12, “the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap *their* hands” (KJV), is not a literal description of the creation’s joy at Israel’s return from Babylon, any more than Hos 5:12, “I am like maggots to Ephraim, and like rottenness to the house of Judah,” is a literal self-description of God. Conservative expositors have long sought metaphorical readings of the material contained in the Song of Solomon, rather than deal with what appears to be erotica, if the text be taken literally. A recent 350-page collection of essays struggles with the problem of *pistis Christou* (“faith *in* Christ” or “the faithfulness *of* Christ”) in Paul’s letters.¹² In Greek the genitive is ambiguous; both are possible. In English we must choose and thereby lose half the meaning. A similar situation occurs at John 3:3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born *anōthen*, that is, “again/from above.” It is impossible to translate Jesus’ statement literally here in such a way as to preserve the ambiguity.

I propose that the concept of history has often clouded our discussions of literal readings. Take Jonah 3:3 as an example. The NIV reads the last half of the verse as, “Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.” Another excellent, modern translation, the NRSV, translates, “Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across.” As to the first phrase, the two translations deal with the literal “a city great to God” in very different ways. Both recognize that “to God” functions as a divine epithet or superla-

¹²M. F. Bird and P. M. Sprinkle, eds., *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009).

tive.¹³ Where Snooki on *Jersey Shore* might say Nineveh was a “helluva big city,” Hebrew says it was a “God of a big city,” that is, it was “big, even by God’s standards” or “exceedingly large.” Why then does NIV interpret the greatness of Nineveh in terms of importance? The NIV’s translation of the next phrase, similarly influenced toward importance (“a visit required three days,” that is, “there’s so much to see and do in Nineveh that you can’t possibly experience it properly in a day or two”), suggests that the NIV is uncomfortable with speaking of Nineveh’s size. And that may be because, unlike the majority of such biblical references, we know how big historical Nineveh was—approximately three square miles.¹⁴ Since we also know that a “three days’ walk” was between 50 and 60 miles, the *historical* impossibility of Jonah 3:3 has taken precedence over the literal reading of the text for the NIV (and others, it should be said). Naturally, assumptions as to the genre of Jonah also play a part. The historical impossibility is not a problem if Jonah is a “whale of a story” and not “the story of a whale.” The translation seems to be more concerned with reading the text historically than with reading it literally, since it is the literal reading that precludes the historical.

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In point of fact, most modern English translations are a blend of these two approaches with one or the other approach dominating.¹⁵ The New American Standard Version and the Revised Standard Version strongly favor the word-for-word approach; the New American Bible, the New King James Version, the New Jerusalem Bible, and the recent English Standard Version, somewhat less so. Other recent translations strongly favor the meaning-for-meaning approach, especially the Revised English Bible, Today’s English Version, and its replacement, the Contemporary English Version.

A growing number of major translations, however, seek to effectively utilize the strengths of both approaches while minimizing their weaknesses. Mainline Protestant (NRSV), Roman Catholic (NAB), and Evangelical perspectives (NIV, NET, and NLT) are all represented in this group, and it is no surprise that they are among the most popular Bibles today. A recent entry, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, has recognized this state of affairs and intentionally describes itself as eschewing both formal and dynamic approaches in favor of what it calls “optimal

¹³Ronald J. Williams, *Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 34, # 81.

¹⁴Charles Halton, “How Big Was Nineveh? Literal versus Figurative Interpretation of City Size,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18 (2008) 196.

¹⁵Paraphrases such as *The Living Bible* and *The Message*, though very popular, are intentionally omitted from this listing of Bible translations.

equivalence,” essentially the blending mentioned above.¹⁶ The NET Preface makes similar claims:

[T]he translators and editors used the notes to give a translation that was formally equivalent, while placing a somewhat more functionally [or dynamically] equivalent translation in the text itself to promote better readability and understandability. The longstanding tension between these two different approaches to Bible translation has thus been fundamentally solved.

Such decisions are to be applauded, especially in the wake of extreme proponents on both sides of the formal correspondence to functional equivalence continuum.

USING DIFFERENT BIBLES WISELY

Considerations of space preclude an annotated listing of the relative strengths and weaknesses of English versions of the Bible today.¹⁷ Furthermore, there is no “best” translation of the Bible. One’s preferences regarding style, translation theory, and theological perspective, not to mention biblical literacy, reading level, sensitivity to inclusive language, denominational affiliation, and intended use play too large a role in this thoroughly subjective decision. The question is really, which is the best Bible for me/my congregation/my youth group/my Sunday School class/my Bible Study group/my devotions/etc. That being said, there are a number of things to keep in mind as one selects a Bible so as to take advantage of the riches our bumper crop of Bibles provides. In decreasing order of importance you should know if your Bible is essentially a word-for-word or a meaning-for-meaning translation; whether it accurately translates the original; whether it can convey its understanding of the original in meaningful English sentences; and in what ways it is biased. All Bibles are biased. You cannot take thoughts and ideas from one language, time, and culture, run them through the wonder that is you, and have them emerge in your language unscathed. This is what the Italian saying “traduttore, traditore” (that is, “translator, traitor”) means to convey. But you can be aware of your own biases and the biases of the Bible you are reading.

The first step toward an informed use of many translations is knowing whether your translation is formally, functionally, or optimally equivalent. All recent Bibles identify themselves in these ways in their front matter. If you are able to use only one Bible, it should be a word-for-word translation such as the RSV. The NAB or the recent ESV are also good choices from Roman Catholic and Evangelical perspectives. The reason for choosing a word-for-word translation if you only have one Bible is surprisingly counterintuitive to many; that is, the word-for-word

¹⁶HCSB, vii.

¹⁷Many fine resources are currently available, especially for Bibles published before 2000. See Daniell, *English Bible*; S. Kubo and W. F. Specht, *So Many Versions? Twentieth-Century English Versions of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); Lewis, *The English Bible*; John J. Pilch, *Choosing a Bible Translation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000); Wegner, *Journey*. For recent Bibles, see Ken Collins, “Translations of the Bible into English,” <http://kencollins.com/bible-t2.htm> (accessed April 20, 2011).

translations are more ambiguous! They tend to preserve more of the possible meanings that may be in the original text without deciding among them.

A much preferred alternative to this would be to have two of the optimally equivalent Bibles (NRSV and either NIV or HCSB). All three are excellent translations, based upon solid textual witnesses, knowledgeable in the biblical languages and contemporary translation theory, and written in fresh, contemporary English. Comparing the mainline Protestant, more liberal NRSV readings with the Evangelical, more conservative NIV or HCSB readings would provide a fairly broad range of interpretive options. The NET, in either its web based¹⁸ or print version is also an excellent choice. Its translation nicely bridges the gap between the biblical languages and English, and its extensive notes are superb, usually presenting both sides fairly before suggesting the more conservative option.

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In either case, it is far better to make use of *several* translations. The basis of your study should be a word-for-word translation or translations as suggested above. But the others should be representative of the meaning-for-meaning approach such as the TEV, the REB, the NJB, even the NLT. These translations decide between the various options in a text for you. This means they can be marvelously helpful in starting your interpretive juices flowing as you think about how the translators have read the text, why they decided to translate it as they did, and why they rejected other possibilities.

If you are lucky enough to be in a Bible study group, why not bring as many different translations as possible so you can compare the various readings together? One advantage to this approach is the opportunity for individuals to share why a particular translation speaks more directly to them. In Bible study, the goal is understanding what God has to say to us about our relationship to God and each other, not which translation is ultimately most satisfying or intellectually most stimulating.

Another advantage to this approach is the opportunity it provides to encourage the reading of the Bible. I begin every discussion of Bible versions with the statement that I am in favor of any Bible you are reading. I'll repeat that: I am in favor of any Bible that you are reading. Any Bible translation we are reading is better than any Bible sitting unopened on the coffee table. It is better to be reading The Reversed Substandard Version than *not* reading the Nestle-Aland Greek New Tes-

¹⁸<http://net.bible.org> (accessed January 25, 2011).

tament! By affirming other translations and inviting others to share what they have learned, the whole group can become more aware of the richness of God's message in a context that allows for a variety of insights and correctives.¹⁹ ⊕

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¹⁹For further suggestions and a recent, clearly presented overview of the topics discussed above, see Donald Kraus, *Choosing a Bible: For Worship, Teaching, Study, Preaching, and Prayer* (New York: Seabury, 2006). A more technical approach can be found in Cecil Hargreaves, *A Translator's Freedom: Modern English Bibles and Their Language* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993).