

The Bible and Translation

URL for handouts, readings, and extra resources: <http://jlharmon.com/seekers-class>

Nov 1 - Week 1: Why and How? (Why read the Bible? How does translation work?)

Nov 8 - Week 2: Which? (Which translation should I read? Hint: It depends.)

Nov 15 - Week 3: But what about... (Did Paul really write those words? Do I need to learn Greek? What's the Septuagint? ...etc.)

Different purposes

- Last week we talked about why we read the Bible. What are some contexts in which we read the Bible?
- Do we always read the Bible in the same way? What are some differences in the ways we engage with the text?

Different Translations

Number one thing to remember: *all translations have pros and cons and are useful for certain purposes.*

Translations can be put on a spectrum from “word-for word” to “paraphrase”:

A strictly **word-for-word** translation is almost useless as a translation because the meaning is not clear in English. But it can be used to look at the original language texts. Most “**literal**” or “**formal equivalence**” translations lean this direction, but make the text grammatical in English.

A **dynamic equivalence** translation attempts to make the translation clear and idiomatic, translating the “thought” behind the original text. The full interpretation of the text, however, is left up to the reader. Many modern translations attempt this.

A **paraphrase** turns out to be more like a commentary, with all of the interpretation of the text left to the translator. They are easy to understand, but you have to trust the cultural and theological lens of the translator.

Overview of some English Bible translations

KJV (1611): The culmination of a couple centuries of political and religious reform (Wyclif, Tyndale). Even if you've never read the Bible, you are familiar with certain phrases just based on its ubiquity in English literature and culture.

Pros: Alluded to everywhere in literature. Defined what the English language should be much like Shakespeare. Many idioms came into English based on this (and Tyndale's) translation.

Cons: Over 400 years old. English has changed quite a bit since it was translated. We have a better understanding of ancient Hebrew and Greek now. The KJV only used the Masoretic text and Received Text manuscripts; we have more and older copies of scripture now.

(British revised version in 1885, American revision (ASV) in 1901)

RSV (1952): first serious challenger to KJV's dominance. Two modern daughter translations: NRSV and ESV.

Good News Bible (1976): First Bible using the translation theory of “dynamic equivalence” (thought-for-thought).

Pros: Popular among second-language English speakers. Easy to understand. Minimal theological bias.

Cons: Older translation, some language/theology is dated. Perhaps too much of a paraphrase.

NIV (1978): The most popular English Bible, the culmination of the “dynamical equivalence” theory.

Pros: Clear, readable modern language. Sounds like modern literature (not stilted or old fashioned).

Very widespread, thus familiar to many. Has been revised recently (2011)

Cons: Somewhat of an Evangelical bias. “Dynamic equivalence” translation forces translators to make some interpretive decisions to make understandable English.

NRSV (1989): The standard academic Bible. Used in many progressive churches.

Pros: Fairly literal, accurate rendering into modern English. Uses best manuscripts. Used by academics in a wide variety of traditions.

Cons: Academic language is not easy to just pick up and understand. Theological bias leans progressive/mainline (maybe this is a pro...)

NLT (1996): A popular modern English version that leans towards paraphrase (revised 2004)

Pros: Very understandable. Easy to read. Natural-sounding English. Uses emotional language to evoke feelings that the original text would have.

Cons: Textual interpretation is done for you by evangelical-leaning translators. Text is oversimplified in some places where the original is hard to understand.

ESV (2001): Pushback against dynamic equivalence. Current favorite among Conservative Evangelicals.

Pros: Word-for-word translation theory gives you the feeling of looking into the original languages. Puzzling out an interpretation of the text is left up to the reader.

Cons: Definite Evangelical theological bias. Word-for-word translation makes text less understandable at first glance.

The Message (2002): The most popular “paraphrase” version.

Pros: Understandable. Current, idiomatic English. Doesn’t necessarily use “Biblese” idioms.

Cons: Much of the interpretation of scripture is done for you. Doesn’t sound as “serious” as we like to take the Bible sometimes.

NET (2005):

Pros: Understandable modern English. Strikes a balance between keeping the Greek/Hebrew text at the forefront and being idiomatic. Tons of footnotes from the translators.

Cons: Academic tinge to language takes some work to read. To get the full picture of the text, you have to read the footnotes.

Translation comparison

2 Corinthians 5:17:

Greek

hōste *ei* *tis* *en* *Christō* *kainē* *ktisis* *ta* *archaia*
Therefore if anyone in Christ new creation the old things

parēlthen *idou* *gegonen* *kaina*
have passed away behold has emerged new

KJV

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

NRSV

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

ESV

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

NIV

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

NET

So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come!

NLT

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

Message

Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it!

What do we notice?

- What is the same from translation to translation?
- What is different?
- What would happen if you only read the most “word-for-word” translation?
- What would happen if you only used the most “paraphrased” translation?

Next week: Further questions about Bible translation. If you have time, watch the video and read the article from Joel Hoffman. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-joel-hoffman/five-ways-your-bible-tran_b_1007058.html

Five Ways Your Bible Translation Distorts the Original Meaning of the Text – Joel Hoffman

From the Ten Commandments to the Psalms to the Gospels, English translations of the Bible distort the original meaning of the text: The Ten Commandments don't forbid coveting. Psalm 23 is not primarily about sheep or a shepherd. And God didn't give his only begotten son because he loved the world so much.

The problems stem from flawed translation techniques that haven't been updated in hundreds of years.

In particular, there are three common ways of determining what the ancient words of the Bible mean: etymology, internal structure, and cognates. But they don't work very well.

Two other factors further degrade modern translations: a general desire not to change historical translations and a misunderstanding of how to translate metaphors like "God's hand" (God doesn't literally have a hand) or "the Lord is my shepherd."

These five issues have conspired to create English translations that conceal what the Bible originally meant.

Familiar, modern languages like English or Spanish illustrate what goes wrong.

The English words "ballot" and "bullet" share an ancient source, but they mean completely different things. Likewise, "grammar" and "glamour" used to be the same word, but most students don't find grammar to be glamorous. These pairs are examples of how etymology is misleading.

Knowing what an office is does not shed light on what an officer does, even though "officer" has the word "office" in it, just as sweetbread is not sweet and it's not bread. These words demonstrate the danger of relying on internal structure -- roots, prefixes, suffixes and so forth -- to discern a word's meaning. (Also, a "strip mall" isn't what some people might suspect.)

There's a word "demand" in French and it confuses English speakers because it means "to ask," not "to demand." In Spanish, "embarazada," does not mean "embarrassed" but rather "pregnant." These kinds of related words (known as cognates) are common in various languages. It stands to reason that if the words are related they ought to mean the same thing, but it's not true. Cognates, like etymology and internal structure, are unreliable.

Proverbs 28:21 in the 400-year-old classic English translation known as the King James Version (KJV) cautions, oddly, that "to have respect of persons is not good." But 400 years ago, "respect" meant "to be partial," and the point was to avoid favoritism. Additionally, the KJV's "turtle" whose voice is heard in the beautiful imagery of Song of Solomon is a bird. These examples demonstrate a fourth problem plaguing modern translations: the power of history.

In part because of the generally conservative nature of religion -- "out with the old, in with the new" is not a particularly welcome sentiment at most seminaries -- these and other familiar but outdated translations often stick with us and continue to influence Bible translators. (One especially grievous case is the well known but widely misunderstood phrase "God so loved the world" in John 3:16. The meaning of "so" here has changed.)

Shakespeare writes that "Juliet is the sun." But even though melanoma comes from exposure to the sun, Shakespeare didn't mean that Juliet is that girl who causes skin cancer. Obviously, he meant that she has some very specific and culturally defined qualities of the sun, such as beauty. This represents perhaps the trickiest flaw in modern translations: missing the important parts of metaphor and other symbolic language.

Unfortunately, etymology, internal structure, and cognates are the three pillars of Bible translation. And with them, the power of history and a focus on the wrong parts of metaphor degrade all English Bibles even more.

So your Bible translation contains flaws as bad as: mixing up "ballot" and "bullet" (etymology), thinking that all officers work in offices (internal structure), mixing up requests and demands (cognates), thinking that turtles fly (history), and thinking that romance must involve cancer (metaphor).

Fortunately, more modern and reliable translation practices are available, though they haven't made their way into published Bible translations yet. Still, more than at any other time since the Bible was composed, we are better equipped now to understand the ancient words of Scripture.