

BIBLES INTERNATIONAL TRANSLATION PHILOSOPHY¹

I. Introduction

Genesis records the first use of language in relation to the present creation. On the first day of creation God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). His powerful word created the heavens, the earth, and all earth’s inhabitants in six literal days. On the sixth day of creation, God created man and woman and then began to give His special revelation to them (Gen. 1:22). At the beginning of mankind’s existence on this earth, people shared the same language and the same speech (Gen. 11:1); but because of their depraved nature, they asserted their rebellion against God by building a city and a tower to unite them (Gen. 11:4). In order to thwart mankind’s plans, God confounded or mixed their language so that they could no longer understand one another (Gen. 11:7). This creation of multiple languages resulted in the dispersion of man across the whole earth. Thus began the ever-evolving linguistic variety that has characterized the rest of human history.

But though God created multiple languages to keep mankind from uniting against Him, He gave them only one Book to enable them to be united under the Lordship of His Son, Jesus Christ, through the salvation provided by the cross of Calvary. God used languages that He allowed to exist—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—to speak to mankind, but He intended His Scriptures to be for speakers of all languages. He appealed universally to speakers of all languages through the events at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit enabled the early church to declare the wonderful works of God in multiple, foreign languages (Acts 2:1-11). Scriptures are “given by inspiration of God” and are for “the man of God,” no matter what language he speaks (2 Tim. 3:16). “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). He puts no linguistic qualification upon such statements. Christ will have redeemed persons from every language (Rev. 5:5; 7:9), so He wants each of these believers to become “thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:17). This growth happens only through the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). Thus, God intends speakers of every language to receive His Scriptures, and He willed it that they would receive the same revelation, though in a different form (i.e., in a different language). He so designed language that what He said in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, He could also communicate in another language through translation. The process of translation seeks to preserve all of the components of God’s communication inscripturated in the Bible through the transfer from the linguistic forms of the source language to linguistic forms of the target language.

II. The Essence of Our Philosophy

A. Bibliology

Translation operates within the theological field known as bibliology. Bibliology has four subcategories that touch directly upon translation: revelation, inspiration, preservation, and illumination. Revelation is the disclosure of what was previously unknown—specifically, spiritual truths about God, man, supernatural beings, creation, etc. (John 16:13; Heb. 1:1-2; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). It is the communication of God’s mind. Revelation is divided into two types: general and special. General revelation includes the created physical order, history, and the nature of mankind. Special revelation includes theophanies, visions, dreams, angels, prophetic

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spokesmen, the Urim and Thummim, the casting of lots, historical events, Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures.

Thus, Scriptures are one form of special revelation. They are the enduring, written communication of God's mind to all generations. God gave the Scriptures through inspiration, the supernatural process in which the Holy Spirit moved holy men of God to write down divine revelation (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). In this process, the writers' individuality is maintained, but their depravity is restrained. In other words, the Scriptures are without error.

Though inspiration deals only with the original autographs of Scripture, these autographs would have had no benefit for future generations unless God preserved that revelation for them. The corollary to inspiration is preservation. Though God has allowed the original autographs to disappear, He has preserved His inspired Word primarily through multiple manuscripts, and secondarily, through versions and other documents (e.g. lectionaries, patristic writings). Since manuscripts preserve the Scriptures in the same languages as the original, they are evidences of transcriptional preservation. Since versions preserve the Scriptures in a different language, they are evidences of transformational preservation. The linguistic forms have been transformed from one language to another, but the communication of God's mind has been preserved. All of these writings are the fulfillment of God's promise that He would preserve His Word (Mat. 5:18). God fulfilled His promise by working through men in a providential manner, not in a supernatural one as He did with inspiration.

The believer understands the Scriptures through the process of illumination. In illumination, the indwelling Spirit of God enables the believer to see the spiritual significance of what God has communicated in Scripture (1 Cor. 2:11-14; 1 John 2:20, 27; 5:10). The unbeliever may be able to understand the words and the grammar of the Scriptures, but he cannot grasp the spiritual significance of those forms, unless the Spirit chooses to enlighten him (Matt. 13:19-22; 1 Cor. 2:14; Heb. 6:4). Only the believer can have continual access to the Spirit's ministry of illumination.

B. Translation

The process of Bible translation, then, is a subset of preservation and functions by means of both man's linguistic understanding and the Holy Spirit's illumination. In regard to man's linguistic understanding, the translator seeks to preserve all the components of meaning of the source texts (written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) as he transfers those components from one linguistic form to another. The essence of his work centers upon meaning; hence, the translator must attain an objective, semantic understanding of those components in order to translate them adequately. But Bible translation, being a form of preservation, encompasses more than the management of linguistic components; it is a synergistic effort, requiring the cooperation of God and man. However, it is not a miraculous synergistic work, as is inspiration. Instead, God guides man as he seeks to understand God's Word through the interplay of theology, exegesis, and linguistics. Each of these disciplines is evident through various factors which relate both to the source text and the translated text. These factors constitute the underlying structure for the methodology of Bible translating. Among the most significant, the following may be mentioned.

1. Factors Related to the Source Text

Theological Factors Related to the Source Text: First, the doctrine of the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures is embedded, not in the meaning, but in the forms of the autographs that have been preserved in the biblical copies. Though translation may be primarily a transfer of meaning, respect for the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures should prompt great care in the handling of the source texts and prevent the translator from performing casual and undue changes in its equivalent transfer from the form of the source texts to those of the versions.

Second, the Scriptures mirror the infinity of God, whose character they display. All that is revealed in the Bible is not understood, since man's finite mind cannot fully comprehend God's infinite mind. In addition, intended ambiguity is sometimes built into the forms of the original texts. Hence, an exhaustive translation of all the components of meaning enclosed in theological concepts and certain passages of the Bible is in all probability impossible. The translator, however, must seek to understand those concepts and passages as well as he can and preserve the intended ambiguities.

Third, God has privileged each believer with priestly responsibilities (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Therefore, the translator should not expand the translation in an attempt to interpret the Scriptures for the reader (beyond what is required to make the text understandable) or to supposedly bring God closer to man.

Fourth, the primary, intended audience of the Scriptures is the believer (Heb. 1:1-2; Jude 3). The great bulk of Scripture is for the teaching and edification of the saint, who then is best equipped to use that Word in reaching the unbelievers of his language group. In other words, God entrusts His Word to the church, "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), and the church takes His Word to the world. Therefore, the language and vocabulary used by church people should have priority over language and vocabulary used by non-church people, when the original text gives the same priority. When the original text uses standard language and vocabulary that could be understood clearly by believer and unbeliever alike, the translator should use a similar level of communication. In essence, the translator should preserve the literary level of the original text.

Fifth, the translator must believe—and it will quickly be confirmed by experience—that some Scriptures are difficult to interpret. The Scriptures themselves acknowledge this difficulty (2 Pet. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:14) and thus demand diligent and continual study for understanding and edification (John 5:39; Pro. 2:2-6). Even then, the believer must benefit from the illuminating work of the Spirit (Eph. 1:17-19; Ps. 119:13; 1 Cor. 2:14). The prophets themselves understood the necessity of relying upon God for understanding of God's revelation (Dan. 12:8; Zec. 4:4, 5, 13; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). The goal of the translator is to achieve a complete understanding of the original text, but he must be prepared for the possibility that such a goal may elude him in some passages.

Exegetical Factors Related to the Source Text: First, the historicity of the Scriptures argues against their contextualization into the modern world. God's revelation is rooted in a cultural and historical framework; thus, that revelation cannot be uprooted and replanted in modern-day ground without great damage. Second, a fundamental, exegetical principle of biblical interpretation is "one meaning and many applications." Therefore, the translation must not reflect only one of those applications at the exclusion of all others but rather must provide the possibility to arrive at all the applications that can be retrieved from the source text. Third, as a corollary to the previous factor, the translator must seek a complete transfer; that is, all things being taken into consideration, all the components of meaning from the source text must be translated. Every aspect of the single meaning of the source text should be transferred in the translation, thus allowing the student or reader of the translation to arrive at the same conclusions as the recipients of the original texts.

Fourth, though translation requires the illumination of the original text and the understanding of linguistic meaning, the translator does not always need to understand all of the theological implications of the source text in order to translate it adequately. Any communication may contain intended ambiguity; such is also the case with divine communication. And God Himself intended that the understanding of His revelation would be partial on earth (1 Cor. 13:9-12). Fifth, the meaning of certain passages is

associated with the form of the text, whether on a book level or at a sentence level. Deuteronomy is given in the form of a suzerain treaty, and the exegete must understand the significance of this form. The meaning of poems is also intimately connected to their forms. For example, biblical poetry often uses semantic parallelism, and the exegete must know the different types of parallelism to properly comprehend the meaning of the poem. If such forms can be adequately preserved in the translation to the same meaningful level intended in the source text, they should be.

Sixth, the style and the form of language in both testaments reflect purpose rather than chance (cf. Luke, Romans, etc.). The authors intended to use certain words, repetitively at times and interchangeably at others. Such a design should be preserved.

Seventh, when the writers of the New Testament cited an Old Testament passage, they usually used the Septuagint (LXX). These citations can provide helpful principles for modern-day translations in regard to exegesis and translation methodology and philosophy.

Linguistic Factors Related to the Source Text: First, the Biblical writers applied proper grammatical rules and respected the linguistic precepts of the languages in which they wrote. Hence, translations must follow proper linguistics. Second, the subject developed in a passage will generally decide the choice of the vocabulary and style of that passage. Therefore, the translator must be careful not to (pre-)impose a level of simplicity or complexity that is incompatible with the source text. Third, the degree of details in discussing a subject will decide the degree of sophistication in the use of vocabulary. Therefore, the translator should not expect that all the vocabulary in the source text will have corresponding equivalence in the language of the translated text.

2. Factors Related to the Translated Text

In addition to the factors related to the source text, there are also those related to the translated text.

Theological Factors Related to the Translated Text: First, the Scriptures are clear (or, perspicuous); that is, God communicated to be understood, using in most instances everyday language with illustrations and images, as ordinary people would do (Psa. 19:7; 119:130; Pro. 2:1-9; John 7:17; 1 Cor. 2:12-14). Therefore, Bible translations should aim at understandability. Second, though the primary, intended audience of the Scriptures is God's people, the theme of the Scriptures is redemption. That includes men and women of all levels of education and of no education at all. The translation of the Scriptures must reflect God's intention that all people would be able to receive His revelation in a meaningful manner. Third, as a corollary to that intention, the Scriptures are for the most part addressed to lay people. Highly sophisticated, theological jargon would rob them of the communication that God intended for them. Fourth, at the last judgment, each man will give account for himself on the basis of what God communicated (Rom. 14:2). It is, therefore, appropriate for God to communicate understandably to man the basis on which man would be judged. Fifth, the New Testament writers' use of the Septuagint indicates that they believed that this Greek translation of the Old Testament, at least in the quoted passages, was the Word of God. Thus, the modern-day translator can have the confidence that his faithful translation of the original text must also be accepted by today's readers as the Word of God.

Exegetical factors related to the translated text: First, the biblical writers did not expect their readers to rely upon another language or extensive training in order to understand them; they even translated certain foreign terms that might not be readily understood by their original audience (e.g., John 1:41, 42). Second, translating literally may at times

violate the intention of the Biblical writers. Hence, the translation must be adjusted so that the semantic components of the source text match the semantic components of the translated text.

Linguistic factors related to the translated text: First, each language has its own linguistic characteristics. The translator should not impose the linguistic elements of the source text upon the language of the translated text. Second, since meaning is caught by the reader of the vernacular only in his language, the forms of the receptor language should have priority over the forms of the original language. Third, each language has its own way of incorporating new vocabularies. The language of the translated text must be allowed to assimilate new concepts according to its linguistic potential. In other words, the translator must not indiscriminately impose an artificial, linguistic method of dealing with a new concept, but must instead respect the leaning of the receptor language. Fourth, believers in a given area develop factors that they perceive as important to authenticate translations of the Scriptures (e.g., printing Bibles in two columns rather than one, etc.). That tendency often applies to vocabulary as well. The translator should be sensitive to elements of perceived authenticity in the church.

The factors related to the source text require that Bible translation be as literal as possible. Those related to the translated text require for the translation to be as comprehensible as possible.

III. The Application of Our Philosophy

The essential methodological guidelines that direct us in the application of our philosophy must be compatible with the theological, exegetical, and linguistic factors related both to the source text and the translated text. These guidelines must serve as the basis of evaluation for every technique we use in order to function as stewards of God's written revelation.

As we establish our translation methodology, we have to ask ourselves one question: Does a belief in verbal plenary inspiration essentially require a practice of word-for-word translation or "formal equivalence"? The position of some organizations is that formal equivalence is the only possible method for those who hold to verbal plenary inspiration. This position, however, is negated by the fact that there are examples in the Scriptures of the Greek translation (LXX) of the Old Testament that are not formal equivalent translations. For example, in Exodus 2:14 the Hebrew reads literally, "Who made you a man, a prince, or a judge over us?" The LXX and Acts 7:27 and 35 say, "Who made you a ruler or a judge over us?" (See also Exo. 3:5 in Acts 7:33; Deu. 25:5, 7 in Matt. 22:44, Mark 12:19, and Luke 20:28; Pro. 25:21-22 in Rom. 12:20). Furthermore, the fact that many expressions in the Bible cannot be translated word for word without distorting the meaning proves that formal equivalence can actually be a wrong way of translating at times.

Belief in verbal plenary inspiration does demand that during the process of translation the translator must fully understand the meaning as the sum of all the components of meaning in the source language; transfer the meaning, not just the words, to the target language; and faithfully represent the meaning of the source in accurate and understandable words of the target language.

Nearly all translation theories have as their goal equivalence. Various equivalence theories have arisen in the latter half of the 20th century, each trying to capture the particular nuance of equivalence that their proponents consider to be the most essential. Rather than seeking a specific label for our translation methodology, it would be better to use existing literary terms related to translation and explain our methodology as operating within a range of possibilities under the general term "modified literal." This methodology includes treating idioms as units and transferring accordingly, and transferring function words to the target language as their corresponding grammatical functions.

Certain specific translation techniques and elements that have identified with dynamic equivalence² have become translation issues and, therefore, need to be addressed specifically. First, the limited use of grammatical category skewing, where in some case nouns are translated as verbal actions, is advisable when the target language does not contain nouns that match up to the nouns of the source language, but in general grammatical categories will be preserved. For example, it is acceptable to change “the declaration of the Lord” to “the Lord declares,” if the target language does not have a noun for “declaration.”

Second, the breakdown of the surface structure of languages to kernel structures (basic sentence structures) can be a useful technique for the sake of better understanding of meaning and therefore better transfer across languages. However, the meaning of a sentence is more than the sum of all its parts. Meaning also depends upon the larger literary context (i.e., paragraph, pericope, book, and Bible) as well as the historical, cultural, and situational context of the speakers of a particular sentence. Meaning may also transcend literal, unambiguous, grammatical categorization. The translator must have regard for meaning at all levels of communication. In addition, the reduction of a sentence into kernel structures risks losing the interconnections of those kernels in the form of the original sentence. Such a risk can be counterbalanced only by a careful regard to the structure of the sentence in the source text. This safeguard should also protect the translator from a weakness of kernel analysis—a translation filled with choppy and disconnected sentences. An abuse of kernel analysis is the introduction of “implied kernels.” Such additions must be avoided.

Third, the analysis of the source text, the transfer of structures and units, and then the restructuring as elements of the translation process are also useful techniques, provided the actual discourse elements of the text are carefully analyzed and transferred along with the process. However, the translator will not perform radical restructuring, such as that which involves large-scale obscuring of traditional verse units in favor of blocks of text that represent multiple verses (small-scale restructuring may be necessary in limited cases where complex paragraphs and/or sentences can be put into an easier sequence of thoughts and a simpler structure of sentences, but the meaning must remain unchanged). Nor will the translator restructure poetry to diminish or eliminate parallelism or engage in other forms of restructuring that radically change the form of the text.

While the translator must always keep in mind the reaction and response of the receptor people and culture, too great an emphasis on the response is likely to result in distortion and simplifying of the source language message. The translation is not meant to be a commentary or a summary, but rather a faithful transfer of the contents of the text. In addition, translation cannot take the place of effective preaching and teaching. While a translation must be as clear and understandable as possible, loading the translation down with additional information not directly implied by specific words in the text will limit the effectiveness of the translation for long-term use and for exposition and teaching. No translation can fully present all the background information each believer will need or not need based on his or her spiritual growth. A translation must not become a commentary, nor should it fail to count on the work of the Holy Spirit to guide and teach. Part of an adequate philosophy and methodology of translation must be the provision of additional resources for the support of the teaching and preaching as well as personal use of the Scriptures (e.g., footnotes, introductions, pictures, sidebars, glossaries, etc.).

Finally, cultural equivalence as a methodology for handling unknown objects or concepts in the source language is not an acceptable approach, since it usually involves a distortion of the original

² “Dynamic equivalence” is a translation theory that by semantic and grammatical analysis reduces the source text to kernel structures, transfers those structures to similar ones in the target language, and then restructures them into natural forms of the target language so that the information load of the new translation is equivalent in effect and meaning for the receptor in the target language.

message. For example, translating “lamb” as “seal” in John 1:29 in a translation for Eskimos is completely unacceptable, because it destroys the link to the Old Testament sacrificial system. Instead, the readers should be taught what a lamb is and what it signified in the biblical culture. Rather than resorting to cultural equivalence approach, a cultural substitution may be a last resort in very exceptional situations until a better solution can be obtained. For example, there is a difficult Hebrew phrase in Job 6:6 that probably means “the juice of the purslane.” Many translations, including the King James Version, however, substitute the phrase with “the white of an egg”, even though neither the word for “white” nor the one for “egg” appear in the Hebrew. Apparently, this is a cultural substitution for a difficult phrase. Until more information can be obtained about the Hebrew, this solution works because it conveys the closest meaning to what the original is purported to be. In such circumstances, a marginal note is strongly recommended to point out the cultural substitution.

In conclusion, we can state the essence of our translation methodology in the following statement:

The meaning of the original text, communicated through the form of that text, must be fully conveyed both by using natural structures of the receptor language and by mirroring the vocabulary and grammatical elements of the original language, neither rigidly reproducing the form of the original nor going beyond the stated meaning of the text to explanation, interpretation, or cultural adaptation.