

Brief Thoughts on Bible Translation

People sometimes express suspicion when they see different Bible translations, thinking they are different 'versions' of the truth. They ask, "*How can anyone come to a definitive understanding of God's truth when there is no definitive version and when there are so many interpretations?*"

The first thing to realise is that if you are reading a Bible in your own language you are already involved in Bible translation because the work you are reading is a translation. You are also already involved in interpretation because translation work is not simply an exercise in linguistics; i.e. the translator does not simply look for the nearest equivalent in the language into which he is translating. Translators must ask themselves what is the original intention of the author and how can we best express that idea in a different language and idiom.

To give a simple example, the Welsh word *Hiraeth* can be translated as "longing". A Welsh person, however, would probably want to tell you that it is not simply longing. You can long for a cup of tea, or for your bed at the end of the day, but that would not be *Hiraeth*. To a Welsh person the word conveys the idea of longing for home and hearth. Would a better translation then be 'homesickness'? Perhaps, but it is more a sort of nostalgia than a simple yearning to get home, therefore, to translate *Hiraeth* as 'longing' would not be wrong; to translate it as 'homesickness' might be better, however to translate it as 'a nostalgic longing for hearth and home' might be better still. A suspicious person might be tempted to conclude that something was going on because one word has become seven!

The truth is that any translation work has to take into account the fact that what is easily grasped in the context and language of one culture has to be explained in the context and language of another. Translators are perfectly capable of doing this but will not always agree on how best to do it. One might wish to stick with 'longing' because it is brief and close enough to the original. Another might want to go for the seven words because, after all, it is the closest to the original meaning – a dynamic equivalence. A third might wish to 'o for 'homesickness' as a worthy compromise.

All three, however, are saying the same thing and the reader must simply be prepared to do some work in reaching an understanding of what is being said. That is why having several Bible translations available is helpful. Not so you can pick the one you like best but so you can understand the nuances in the message being translated. Whichever you choose the translation is accurate and should not be doubted simply because it involves a lot of work on the part of the translator and more than a little on the part of the reader. The only time to complain is when a translator goes to the opposite meaning to the original in translation, i.e. making *Hiraeth* translate to loathing instead of longing.

To give an example from the New Testament using one of my own favourite verses, Romans 8:1&2, here are several translations of this verse:

King James Bible

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

New International Version

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Jerusalem Bible

The reason, therefore, why those who are in Christ Jesus are not condemned is that the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus set you free from the law of sin and death.

Phillips Modern English

The truth is that no condemnation now hands over the head of those who are "in" Christ Jesus. For the new spiritual principle of life "in" Christ Jesus lifts me out of the old vicious circle of sin and death.

American Standard Version

There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death.

They all express these verses slightly differently.

The KJV reflects the times in which it was published, C.1611, and the language and work of the major translator on whose work it is largely based, William Tyndale. Readers of the KJV must take into account the fact that it was specifically designed to be read aloud, and it is certainly true that you get the best from it by reading it aloud.

The NIV is a more modern translation designed both for group study and worship as well as personal study and devotions. It is what is termed a dynamic equivalence, which means the translators asked themselves what is the equivalent English word or phrase that best conveys the meaning of the original and not just a transliteration.

The Phillips is a more free translation produced by one man who clearly wishes to convey the dynamism of the message in these verses. He is as

much preaching and teaching as translating. Nevertheless, it is still a good translation and still conveys the same message.

If you are reading anything, from the Bible to the sayings of Buddha or the wisdom of the Dalai Llama, or a Japanese Manga comic, in your own language rather than the original you are reading a translation. You should ask why it is you trust any translation and then apply that standard consistently.

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Email – rt@reachouttrust.org : Phone & Fax 0845 241 2158