

THE LIMITS OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

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The process of Bible translation involves a number of different steps, of course, but for the purposes of what I want to say here I will distinguish only two steps, one which takes place before translation proper can begin, and the second which involves the process of translation itself.

Establishing the text to translate

As translators are very much aware, the numerous manuscripts which provide us with the ancient text of the Old and New Testaments often have different readings. Before translation can begin, someone must decide what text we are translating. This is the first step of Bible translation. For the great majority of people translating the New Testament, especially if these translators are working with one of the Bible Societies, this means accepting the decisions which were made by the textual experts who gave us the latest edition of the UBS Greek New Testament (UBS GNT). Some other translators will basically accept the text of the UBS GNT but make a few changes here and there, following a variant reading. But only a relatively small number of translation projects have members who are qualified to make their own textual decisions throughout, taking responsibility for the textual base of their own translation and not following any published Greek Testament.

For the purposes of what I want to say, there is no need to go into the details of textual criticism.¹ The point is that before we can translate at all, we must know what we are translating. The textual decisions have to be made before translation proper can begin. Of course it is true that there may be times when translators are wrestling with a passage that is very hard to understand and they come to the conclusion that this text can hardly be what was originally intended. In those cases, they may stop and have a further look at the textual evidence. So in practice, textual decisions can take place at any time. But for a translator to go ahead and

¹ For brief introductions to NT textual criticism, see Joseph Verheyden, "Text, NT," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (5 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 5:540–45, and Michael W. Holmes, "Text Criticism, NT," pages 529–31 in the same volume. For a much more thorough introduction to NT textual criticism, see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

make a translation of a passage, a decision must first be made as to what text the translator is following in that passage.

The work of the textual critics who provide us with our scholarly texts is painstaking and often quite tedious. It is rarely possible to be absolutely certain about the results, but the results of their work are nevertheless impressive. Translators can accept the work of the textual critics with great admiration and appreciation.

Translating the established text

As we have seen, the process of translation depends on this first step. Translation can only go ahead on the basis of a text that has been decided on. But I would like to argue that once the decision about the form of the text has been made, the translator can and should forget about textual issues and proceed to the second step, the actual process of translation. Translators are doing their work in order to communicate with people who use the language of the translation, and it is their responsibility to take the text which has been agreed upon for their project and to make as effective a translation as possible according to the principles they are following.

In the process of translation, NT translators will repeatedly find it necessary to express the message in their own language in a way that differs from the Greek text they are following. In order to make the message clear they will use two words where the Greek uses one, or one word where the Greek uses two or more. They will change the order of the words. They will often use pronouns in place of nouns or nouns in place of pronouns. In some languages, nouns or pronouns are frequently omitted in order to make the meaning clear. In other cases, implicit information will need to be made explicit, or explicit information can be left implicit.

Changes of this kind can be found in almost every verse of a good translation, and it may not be necessary to give examples. However, let us look at how NRSV and some other versions have handled one verse from Mark.

Mark 6.17

If we put the Greek of Mark 6.17 more or less literally, we have “Herod sent and arrested John and bound him in prison on account of Herodias the wife of Philip the brother of him, because he had married her.” Many adjustments are needed if we are going to translate this into good English.

For the Greek “sent,” NRSV has “sent men who,” making explicit the fact that there are other actors here who are left implicit in the Greek. CEV makes the opposite kind of adjustment, saying “Herod arrested John.” English readers will assume that Herod did not make the arrest personally. If we say that a king arrested someone, we know that he, of course, sent someone else to do it on his behalf. The information that Herod “sent,” which is explicit in the Greek, can be left implicit in English.

For the Greek “bound him in prison,” NRSV has “bound him, and put him in prison.” In this case, the Greek text treats it as one action, but NRSV feels that

it is better in English to divide it into two. Other English versions, such as CEV, NLT, and REB, just say “put him in prison,” leaving “bound” implicit. NJB says “had him chained up in prison,” making explicit the type of “binding” that the translators assumed is meant here. There are many ways to deal with the problem, but “bound him in prison” itself is not good English.

For the Greek “the wife of Philip the brother of him,” NRSV has “his brother Philip’s wife.” This simply involves giving the same information in a different word order which is more natural in English.

And for the Greek “because he had married her,” NRSV has “because Herod had married her.” This is an example of the common translational adjustment of using a noun in place of a pronoun. In English it is confusing to use the pronoun “he” here, because it can easily be taken as referring back to Philip rather than Herod. NRSV has a policy that whenever the translators change a pronoun to a noun they add a brief footnote. Here the footnote says simply “Gk *he*.” Other translations, such as NLT, make the same change without a footnote (notice that NRSV has not felt any need to create footnotes for all of the other translational changes they have made in this verse). GNB has here, “Herod did this because of Herodias, whom he had married, even though she was the wife of his brother Philip.” In this case, it is very clear in English that “he” refers to Herod, and there is no need to change the pronoun to a noun. But GNB uses instead a major change in word order.

Textual decisions and translation decisions

All of these adjustments are the kind of changes that translators routinely make when translating from Greek to English. In the course of their work, there is no need whatever for translators to check to see whether there happen to be Greek manuscripts that do the same thing.

Now let us go back and take another look at the textual variants that are found in the different Greek manuscripts. If we study these variants, we will find that many times the ancient scribes did exactly the same sorts of things in Greek that translators do in the normal course of translation. One manuscript may have a pronoun and another a noun in the same place.² The order of words may differ from one manuscript to another.³ Implicit information may be made explicit in some manuscripts, perhaps because a scribe wanted to make sure that the meaning of the text was clear.⁴

Now, I have seen occasions where some members of a translation team were conscious of text-critical issues and they did not want to express the meaning in a certain way in their own language because they were afraid that other textual critics would think that they were following a different text from the one they had accepted. In their language, perhaps it was necessary to make some implicit

2 See the discussion of Matt 17.26 in Roger L. Omanson, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2006), 28–29.

3 See the discussion of Matt 20.31 in Omanson, *A Textual Guide*, 36.

4 See the discussion of Phil 2.26 in Omanson, *A Textual Guide*, 404–5.

information explicit. In most cases this would be done automatically, because it simply follows the requirements of their language or culture. But in a particular verse, there may be a variant reading in some Greek manuscripts which makes the same change that the translators feel the need to make. In this case, some members of the team may say, “No! We cannot do that here! It will look as though we are following the less acceptable reading!”

Depending on the principles a particular translation is following, there may be times when a variant reading is included in a translation. Whenever there are two textual readings that are significantly different in meaning and it is difficult to decide which one is original, translations often include one meaning in the text and the other in a footnote. To this extent translators need to be conscious of places where key variant readings are found in the ancient Greek manuscripts. But ordinarily there will not be a lot of variant readings provided in a translation.

Apart from this matter of key variant readings, I would like to suggest that translators should not allow themselves to be influenced by fears that people will think they are following a secondary reading. Once the textual basis for a translation has been decided on, the translation should go ahead, following the agreed principles, without any concern for alternative texts. There will be numerous times when a translation may seem to follow a less acceptable text, but that is simply a matter of coincidence. It is a normal outcome of good translation, and it is not a cause for concern. Translations are not made for other textual critics, and other textual critics should not be allowed to influence the normal process of translation. On the contrary, textual critics need to be sufficiently aware of the way the process of translation works so that they do not suspect that translations are following secondary textual readings just because the translation happens to be the same as that reading.

Septuagint and Masoretic Text

One sees this problem repeatedly in OT projects. There are many places where the Septuagint translators produced a text which differs from the Hebrew only in order to make the meaning clear, not because they were following a different Hebrew text.⁵ Translators in other languages will often find that they need to make precisely the same change that the Septuagint translators made. If that is what their language requires, they should not hesitate to make such a change. They should not avoid the change simply because their text will now agree with the Septuagint. Most translations will have a principle stating that if the translators decide to follow the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew text in a particular place, then a footnote

5 The new German translation of the Septuagint, *Septuaginta Deutsch: Das griechische Alte Testament in deutscher Übersetzung* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2009), prints in italic font those words and phrases which are in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew text. But this German translation does not tell the reader whether the differences are because the Greek translators followed a different Hebrew text or because the translators followed translation techniques that led to non-literal renderings. For discussions of this issue, see Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 114–17; Natalio Fernández Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Versions of the Bible* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 18–31; and Jennifer M. Dines, *The Septuagint* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 117–28.

will be added. If a textual critic does not see such a footnote in the translation, then the textual critic should realize that the translators were not following the Septuagint in that place. In fact the translators may not even have been aware of what the Septuagint says in that place. They simply made a translational change in the normal course of their work and by coincidence⁶ they came up with the same wording that was used by the translator of the Septuagint.

A few examples of this kind of situation can be given from Isaiah.

Isaiah 1.20

The Hebrew of the first part of this verse is something like “If you refuse and rebel, by the sword you shall be devoured.” The Septuagint has “but if you are not willing and do not listen to me, the dagger will devour you.”⁷ Note that the last verb in the Hebrew is passive while the Greek makes that verb active. Many languages will need to use an active verb, but translators will make this decision based on the requirements of their own languages, not because it is what the Septuagint did. Many languages may also parallel the Septuagint in making “me” explicit in the words “will not listen to me.” In the Hebrew verb “rebel,” this is left implicit.

Isaiah 7.1

There is very little difference between the Hebrew and the Septuagint in this verse. However, in the last clause, the Hebrew has a singular verb, “he was not able to overpower it,” while the Septuagint has the plural “they were not able to overpower it.” Since the text mentions two kings who attacked Jerusalem, the singular of the Hebrew is a bit surprising (especially since the parallel passage in 2 Kgs 16.5 has the plural), and many translators may feel the need to use the plural in their own languages. De Waard suggests that in Isaiah the focus is actually on King Rezin of Aram, and Pekah of Israel is mentioned just as an associate.⁸ This may be the reason that Hebrew uses the singular verb here. If this is correct, translators might consider whether there is some way to focus on Rezin, rather than giving equal weight to both kings. However, even when this point is considered, it may still be necessary in some languages to use a plural verb. In fact, many English and French versions use a plural verb here, whether it is strictly necessary or not.

Isaiah 14.30a

In the first part of this verse, the Hebrew has something like “the very poor shall feed,” this being a figurative expression comparing the poor to cattle who have plenty of grass to eat. In the Septuagint the image is kept, but an extra idea is added,

⁶ One person has suggested that the word “coincidence” may not be completely correct here. That is, the modern translation may be similar to the Septuagint precisely because the ancient translator and the modern translator were following similar principles in dealing with a problem in the text. The similar results are not a complete coincidence. This is of course quite true. However, there is rarely only one way to solve a problem in the text, and I am using the word “coincidence” to mean that the modern translator came up with the wording independently, not by trying to follow or even being aware of the ancient reading.

⁷ Adapted from *NETS: A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸ Jan de Waard, *A Handbook on Isaiah* (Textual Criticism and the Translator, Vol. 1; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 32.

namely, that they shall be fed “by him,” referring to God. It may be necessary in other languages to make this aspect explicit. This has in fact been done in at least two English versions, though in a rather different way from what the Septuagint has done. GNB has “The Lord will be a shepherd to the poor of his people,” and NLT has “I will feed the poor in my pasture.”

Isaiah 60.1

The Septuagint adds the vocative “Jerusalem” in the first line, which has of course led some scholars to wonder whether they were following an early Hebrew text with that reading. However, the Septuagint also adds “Jerusalem” in a similar situation in Isa 51.9, and the UBS OT text committee felt that here in 60.1 this was simply a translational addition by the Septuagint. De Waard suggests that other translations may also want to make clear who is being spoken to. If they do this, however, it will be on *translational* grounds, not *textual* ones. But the result will be to make these translations the same as the Septuagint.⁹

Genesis 4.8

One more interesting but also more controversial example may be found in Gen 4.8. Many textual critics understand the Hebrew to say, “Cain said to his brother Abel . . . , and when they were in the field Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.” According to this view, the Hebrew text that we have today is missing something that must have been in the original Hebrew. The words that Cain spoke to his brother have dropped out of the Hebrew, but the Septuagint (and other ancient versions) supply what Cain said when he spoke to his brother: “Let us go out to the field.” In the view of these critics, the problem in this verse is textual, not translational, and the Septuagint was following a Hebrew text that contained the missing speech.¹⁰

However, there are some scholars who believe that the Hebrew text as we have it may in fact be the original text.¹¹ In this case, the problem that we sense in this verse may need to be dealt with translationally rather than textually. If this view is correct, it may be that the Septuagint translators felt the need to make explicit something that was implied in the Hebrew, and that is why the words “Let us go out to the field” were added in the Septuagint. In that case, a translator working in another language today might come independently to the same conclusion. Many people would assume that this translator was simply following the Septuagint, but in fact the similar translation would just be another coincidence. The difficulty in a controversial case like this is that so much has been written about the problem that it might be almost impossible to find a translator today dealing innocently with the Hebrew text alone, unaware of the various solutions that have been proposed.

⁹ De Waard, *A Handbook on Isaiah*, 203–4.

¹⁰ So, for example, Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (2d revised ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 236–37; and E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 30–31, who suggest that the Masoretic Text has an accidental omission here.

¹¹ For example, Dominique Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament. 1. Josué, Juges, Ruth, Samuel, Rois, Chroniques, Esdras, Néhémie, Esther* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 268.

Concluding comments

One does occasionally find a textual critic arguing on the other side of this question, saying that translators must always keep alternative readings in mind as they work. Thus, in a recent article in this journal, Ebojo discusses a particular translation. He says,

While it may be true that the addition . . . makes an expedient clarification, the resultant problem is quite significant, as the issue cannot be justified solely on a translation model or approach at the expense of the textual base. Translators cannot put something into the translation simply because the project follows a *dynamic* or *functional* approach, especially when the added components are a subject of a textual problem and are explicitly discussed in the *apparatus criticus* of the base text.¹²

It is certainly true that when translators follow their normal principles, this will often make it hard for a textual critic to decide just what text the translators were following. However, I want to insist that it is not and should not be a goal of a translation project to do the work in such a way that a textual critic can establish the underlying Greek or Hebrew text simply by looking at the wording of the translation.

There is no way that a translational wording which follows the principles of the project can be said to be “at the expense of the textual base,” as suggested in the quotation above. The textual base was decided before the translation work began, and it will not in any way be affected by the wording of the translation. If normal translation principles produce a wording that happens to be the same as a variant reading, it should be recognized that this is simply a coincidence. There is no need to change the translation to avoid this wording. In fact, most of the time translators will not even be aware that such a variant reading exists. Assuming that translators are simply following the established text of a particular scholarly version, there is no reason why they should constantly check the rejected variant readings at every verse. Translators who are themselves textual critics will probably do this regularly, but there is no reason why other translators should be concerned about these textual issues if their own project is simply following a standard scholarly edition.

I assume that it is other issues that cause disagreements in most translation projects, and that the issue I have raised here does not come up very often. That is good. However, it does sometimes become an issue and it does sometimes influence translators in unfortunate ways. Therefore, I think it is important that the procedures to be followed in these cases should be stated clearly. It is especially important that members of translation projects who are textual critics clearly understand where their responsibilities end, and that they do not try to influence the wording of translations in ways that are not appropriate.

¹² Edgar Battad Ebojo, “How Persuasive Is ‘Persuasive Words of Human Wisdom’? The Shortest Reading in 1 Corinthians 2.4,” *The Bible Translator* 60.1 (2009): 10–21 (13–14).