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## TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION. A FEW NOTES ON THE KING JAMES VERSION

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One of the most significant documents ever written on Bible translation is "The Translators to the Reader", which formed the original preface to the King James Version of 1611. This document is significant for at least two reasons. First, it gives an insight into questions the translators knew they would have to face once their translation was published. Second, in it are revealed some of the translation principles followed by the translators. In this article I would like to do two things: (1) to look into one of the questions the translators knew they would have to face from their intended readership and (2) to state and illustrate two of the basic translation principles followed by the translators.

### "Why Do We Need Another Translation?"

This sounds very much like a modern-day question. However, this same question was raised in objection to the King James Version at the time that work on it was in progress. Many people felt satisfied with the many translations that were already available (Tyndale, Coverdale, Matthew's Bible, Great Bible, Geneva Bible, and Bishop's Bible) and they saw no need for a further translation into English. In reply the KJV translators said:

Many men's mouths have been opened a good while (and yet ar not stopped) with speeches about the translation so long in hand, or rather

perusals of translations made before: and ask what may be the reason, what the necessity of the employment. Hath the Church been deceived, say they, all this while?

In the book of Nehemiah it is stated that Sanballat ridiculed the Jews when they began rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and in the preface to the KJV, the translators draw a parallel between Sanballat and the people who ridiculed them for making another translation of the Bible into English:

Was their translation good before? Why do they now mend it? Was it not good? Why then was it obtruded to the people?

In answer the KJV translators acknowledge that those who translated the Bible before them were "raised up of god, for the building and furnishing of his Church, and that they deserve to be had of us and of posterity in everlasting remembrance". Then they remind the reader how important it is "to deliver God's book unto God's people in a tongue which they understand". Moreover, they point out that their work is the continuation, and indeed the perfecting, of the translations that have gone before them. Bible translators of previous generations would give them thanks, if they were still alive:

Yet for all that, as nothing is begun and perfected at the same time, and the later thoughts are thought to be the wiser: so, if we building upon their foundation that went before use, and being holpen by their labours, do endeavour to make that better which they left so good, no man, we are sure, hath cause to mislike us; they, we persuade ourselves, if they were alive, would thank us.

Finally, the translators provide a concise statement of their purpose in preparing a new translation:

Truly, good Christian reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against; that hath been our endeavour, that our mark.

So we see that the KJV translators faced opposition from people who did not see the need for a new translation. I assume that this will be a problem translators must face in every generation. People become emotionally attached to a particular translation, and they see no need for any further translations. In our own generation we have seen people take refuge in the KJV and use it to oppose any new translation which attempts to put the word of God into the language of the people of our own day. In so doing they are far removed from the spirit of the KJV translators. The Bible translator today can say of the KJV translators what they said of the people who had translated the Bible before them: "they, we persuade ourselves, if they were alive, would thank us".

### **Two Principles Stated in the Preface**

(1) *Marginal Notes.* To many readers of the KJV it comes as a surprise that the original text contained many marginal notes. In fact, it was never the intention of the translators to have the text published without notes, and it is to our loss that KJV is now printed without the original notes. The translators knew that some people would object to the inclusion of notes, and they had something to say to them:

Some peradventure would have no variety of senses to be set in the margin, lest the authority of the Scriptures for deciding of controversies by that show of uncertainty should somewhat be shaken. But we hold their judgement not to be sound in this point.

The translators were less dogmatic regarding their interpretation of the text than are many readers of the KJV today. Because of the uncertainty regarding many points of the text, they felt it necessary to include marginal notes:

. . . it hath pleased God in His divine providence here and there to scatter words and sentences of that difficulty and doubtfulness, not in doctrinal points that concern salvation, (for in such it hath been vouched that the Scriptures are plain) but in matters of less moment, that fearfulness would better beseech us than confidence, and if we will resolve, to resolve upon modesty . . . Now in such a case, doth not a margin do well to admonish the reader to seek further, and not to conclude or dogmatize upon this or that peremptorily? For as it is a fault of incredulity, to doubt of those things that are evident, so to determine of such things as the Spirit of God hath left (even in the judgement of the judicious) questionable, can be no less than presumption. Therefore as S. Augustine saith, that variety of translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense of the Scriptures: so diversity of signification and sense in the margin, where the text is not so clear, must needs do good, yea, is necessary, as we are persuaded.

The KJV did not contain any doctrinal notes, but three other types of notes were included: (a) cross references, (b) readings of other manuscripts not followed in the text, and (c) literal renderings of phrases rendered freely in the text. One alternative rendering is found in Psalm 23.6 which is rendered in KJV "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever". Originally there was a footnote appended to the word "forever" which read "Hebrew: length of days".

(2) *A Dynamic Equivalent Translation.* It comes as a surprise to many devout users of the KJV that the translation is not an attempt at a literal rendering of the original text. In fact, the translators attempted the exact opposite. They realized that the meaning of a word varied according to its context, and so they translated according to the meaning that they believed the word had in a given context. They realized that *translation involves interpretation:*

Another thing we think good to admonish thee of, gentle reader, that we have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words, as some peradventure would wish that we had done, because they observe that some learned men somewhere have been as exact as they could that way. Truly, that we might not vary from the sense of that which we had translated before, if the word signified the same thing in both places (for there be some words that be not of the same sense everywhere) we were especially careful, and made a conscience, according to our duty. But that we should express the same notion in the same particular word; as for example, if we translate the Hebrew or Greek word once by *purpose*, never to call it *intent*; if one where *journeying*, never *travelling*; if one where *think*, never *suppose*; if one where *pain*, never *ache*; if one where *joy*, never *gladness* . . . For is the kingdom of God become words or syllabus? Why should we be in bondage to them, if we may be free?

In Genesis 1-2 there is a Hebrew phrase that appears four times (1.20, 21, 24; 2.7); it differs only in 1.21, where the definite article “the” appears in the Hebrew text. As we shall see from the translations of these verses, the KJV translators did not include “the” in 1.21, but they did in 1.24, where it does *not* occur in the Hebrew text. Notice the different ways in which this construction is rendered in the KJV:

And God said, let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving *creature that hath life* . . . (1.20)

And God created great whales, and every *living creature* that moveth . . . (1.21)

And God said, let the earth bring forth *the living creature* after his kind . . . (1.24)

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became *a living soul*. (2.7)

The translation in 2.7 is significantly different from the earlier three passages. The difference in translation is a result of a difference of interpretation. It is not my intention either to debate or to defend the KJV rendering of Genesis 2.7. However, any person who has ever translated anything immediately recognizes the validity of the principle involved. Each new context involves and requires a fresh study of each word. The KJV translators recognized this, and that is the reason for the four different renderings of this same Hebrew phrase in these passages. Moreover, the translators accepted the results of the best biblical scholarship available to them when they made their decisions about interpretation and translation. The leadership of God’s Spirit came to them in many ways: through the comparison of other translations, through the use of commentaries, and through the constant revision of their own work:

Neither did we think much to consult the translators or commentators, *Chaldee, Hebrew, Syrian, Greek, or Latin*, no, nor the *Spanish, French, Italian, or Dutch*; neither did we disdain to revise that which we had done, and to bring back to the anvil that which we had hammered: but having and using as great helps as were needful, and fearing no reproach for slowness, nor coveting praise for expedition, we have at length, through the good hand of the Lord upon us, brought the work to pass that you see.

One further example will illustrate even more vividly how free the KJV translators were from a one-word-for-one-word approach to translation. Compare the two verses below:

And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he *moved* David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah.

(2 Samuel 24.1)

And Satan stood up against Israel, and *provoked* David to number Israel (1 Chronicles 21.1)

The KJV states in 2 Samuel 24.1 that the Lord “moved” David to number Israel, and in 1 Chronicles 21.1 that Satan “provoked” David to number Israel. But in both verses the Hebrew verb is the same. Evidently the KJV translators did not think it was proper to use the same verb for the Lord and for Satan. Undeniably *interpretation has determined the translation* of these two verses.