

QUALITY IN TRANSLATION

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When there are many different Bible translations in any one language, the question inevitably arises, "Which translation is best?" In some instances that may be an impossible question to answer. Whether one translation can be considered better than another will depend in large measure upon the kind of persons for which it has been prepared and the purposes for which it is intended to be used. Has it been prepared, for example, for well-educated people, perhaps already familiar with earlier translations, or for people who have never read the Bible before? Is it intended for personal study or for reading in public worship? The truth is that when people inquire concerning the "best translation," they often have two quite different ideas in mind. Some are thinking only of exegetical accuracy while others are concerned primarily with stylistic form.

Those who judge a translation only, or primarily, in terms of so-called "accuracy" or "faithfulness to the original" are often not really as much concerned with fidelity to the Greek and Hebrew texts as they are with finding a translation which agrees with established doctrines. A recent article dealing with the question of "the best translation" listed the treatment of six specific doctrines as the essential criteria by which a translation ought to be judged: the trinity, the virgin birth, verbal inerrancy, the deity of Jesus Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, and the premillennial return of the Lord. If a translation is clear and emphatic on each of these doctrines, then it is presumably a "best translation." Such an approach, however, seems to put the cart before the horse. Doctrines should be derived from the biblical text and not the biblical texts from certain doctrines.

On the other hand, there are those who are concerned primarily with stylistic form, and these seem to think that emotive language and aesthetic flourishes are what really count in a translation. Are the idioms cute? Is the language up-to-date? Is the style exciting? Is the format modern? A positive answer to each of these questions may be possible, and yet, at times, this may simply be a matter of putting thick icing on a rather mediocre cake.

For a valid discussion of "the best translation," the really important issue is that of quality, for quality touches every aspect of a translation: text, exegesis, discourse structure, style, illustrations, format, and supplementary materials. Not one of these aspects can be neglected if one is really concerned with quality.

In the first place, a translation can never really be better than its textual base, for the underlying text is where all biblical scholarship begins. Translators of the New Testament into any language cannot afford to proceed without carefully considering the more than 1,700 different passages in which there are meaningful textual variants as listed in the *Greek New Testament* published by the Bible Societies. These 1,700 are by no means the sum total of known variants in the Greek text. Additional variants are found in the apparatus of the Nestle-Aland Text (26th edition), which has the same basic text as the *Greek New Testament* but a different type of apparatus. For the Old Testament,

translators will certainly want to consider carefully the more than 5,000 passages which the committee for the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project has carefully studied and evaluated.

These variants are indicated in the preliminary tentative reports of this committee (the fuller technical reports will be coming out over a period of years beginning in 1981). Recent scholarly work on the Old Testament text has shown conclusively that many of the popular conjectures suggested by scholars in earlier decades can no longer be held valid, nor can the heavy dependence upon the Septuagint version any longer be justified. One important positive result from the study of the Qumran scrolls has been a renewed appreciation for the Masoretic text, and recent linguistic studies have likewise confirmed the fact that the Masoretic text is by no means as obscure or meaningless as some scholars have presumed. In light of all of these developments in textual studies and in view of the fact that committees working on Bible Society texts are not only international but interconfessional in character, no translation team concerned with quality can afford to neglect textual problems.

Quality in translation means not only coming to grips with textual problems but also means careful attention to exegesis, including the meaning of words, sentences, and discourses. The earlier idea that Greek of the New Testament was in some mystical manner the "language of the Holy Spirit" has simply not stood up to scholarly examination. Thousands of papyri from New Testament times have been discovered, and these confirm many significant uses of Greek terms. Furthermore, intensive study of the Septuagint has revealed that a great many New Testament terms are really "semitized Greek," that is, Greek words reflecting Semitic concepts. No longer is it possible to think of the New Testament use of the Greek term *pistis*, "faith", as mere intellectual assent to a set of doctrines—a popular view in the Middle Ages and one even held by some people today. Faith must in most contexts be understood in the sense of loyalty and trust. Likewise, the Greek term *dikaïosunē* is in many contexts not primarily a matter of being declared juridically innocent but of being put in a right relationship with God.

The real significance of words, moreover, is not to be found by analyzing the meanings of words as isolated "pearls on a string," but by studying them in context. For example, in John 9.24 the expression "give God the praise" or "give God the glory" really means "swear to tell the truth." Thus a literal translation here can be very misleading. Those who had condemned Jesus for healing a blind man on the Sabbath were not demanding that this man worship God; they were insisting that he tell the truth under oath.

Some expressions can result in misunderstanding if one does not recognize the difference between the surface structure of the syntax and the deeper meaning which is conveyed by a combination of words. For example, in Romans 1.5 the statement "through whom we have received grace and apostleship" can be doubly misleading. In the first place, the term "we" does not refer to Paul and his colleagues but is clearly a reference to Paul alone. Therefore, in many languages one must translate "we" as "I." In the second place, the coordinate phrase "grace and apostleship" refers not to two different things but to two essentially different aspects of the same experience;

apostleship constitutes the grace which Paul received. This grace must be understood as the privilege of serving Christ. It is for this reason that a number of translations have accurately and faithfully translated the meaning of the Greek text as "through Christ I received the privilege of being an apostle."

If translators are to do justice to the scriptures, it is essential also that they have some understanding of the discourse structure. One needs to recognize, for example, that in the first part of Genesis the names "Adam" and "Eve" both have symbolic meaning. The Hebrew term transliterated "Adam" as a proper name also has the meaning of "man" and is similar to the term for "earth."

Similarly, the name "Eve" is similar to the Hebrew term for "life." Such information can rarely if ever be embodied in a translation and so must be reflected in marginal notes if the text is to be understood correctly. Whether a translation uses "man" or "Adam" in this passage depends in large measure upon the way in which one understands the symbolic significance of the term.

The distinctive literary form of the Book of Jonah as a narrative rather than a succession of oracles (as in the case of most other prophetic books) and the fact that the book was evidently written much later than the time of Jeroboam II mean that this book is not simply a big fish story or the account of a miracle. Furthermore, it is God, not Jonah, who is really the hero in this story. And though this is not stated explicitly in the text of Jonah, an understanding of the theological significance of this book must certainly be reflected in any introduction to a translation of it.

Style is a particularly important aspect of the quality of any translation. In fact, stylistic excellence probably accounts more for an acceptance of a translation than any other factor. The English Revised Version of 1885 and the American Standard Version of 1901 were far more accurate translations than the King James Version, and yet the style was so awkward and heavy that neither of these revisions received the kind of acceptance that it merited. On the other hand, largely due to its lively style, the *Living Bible* has had wide acceptance, despite numerous inaccuracies and almost obvious theological bias. As Professor David E. Garland of Louisville Baptist Theological Seminary has commented in his review in *The Biblical Expositor and Review* (Vol. 76, No. 3, 1979), the *Living Bible's* translation of "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1.16-17 as a matter of "making us ready for heaven" is certainly an inadequate way of dealing with this crucial element in Paul's theology. The *Living Bible* almost always translates Greek *genea* as "nation," implying the Jewish race, when even the American Standard Version, on which the *Living Bible* is evidently based, uses "generation." In 2 Timothy 2.8, phrases are imported from Romans 1.4, and the frequent use of "Messiah" in place of the title which Jesus selected for himself, namely, "the Son of Man," makes largely meaningless Jesus' repeated charges to his disciples not to disclose his Messianic role.

But style cannot be considered as one fixed literary form to which a translation must adhere. There are various levels of style, and for most languages there are three principal such levels: first, the popular every-day colloquial level, which often involves so-called substandard forms of a language; second, the relatively high, literary style, often appreciated for liturgical use; and third, between these two levels, the so-called "common language," the level often

employed in such writings as newspapers and popular essays. An important aspect of good style is the preservation of essentially the same level throughout a document. It is the abrupt shifting from a professorial level of English to an everyday colloquial level even involving slang which has brought considerable criticism against the New English Bible.

Quality of translation must also include supplementary material, especially illustrations. Should the illustrations used in a published Bible translation be essentially decorative or explanatory? Should they function as substitutes for the text, or should they lead people to the text? Is the technique employed in producing such illustrations primarily amateurish or is it professional? Does it reflect indigenous art styles or does it have a distinctly foreign flavor? Is it based upon historical accuracy or is it largely anachronistic? For example, does the Prodigal Son leave home for the foreign country riding a prancing horse or driving a Mercedes Benz? One of the real problems with regard to biblical illustrations is that often they have little or nothing to do with the text itself. They attract attention, but to what? And for what purpose? There is abundant evidence as to the significant value of illustrations, but too often they seem to have been selected for no other purpose than to break up the monotony of pages of solid type.

In discussions of the qualities of translation the matter of format is often completely neglected, even though paragraphing is an important factor in reflecting discourse structure. Section headings (which should identify but not explain content) are particularly useful in helping readers to recognize the important boundaries of included discourses. Truly poetic passages should be translated as poetry, and if so, the format should reflect the way in which poetry in the receptor language is normally printed. It is generally recognized that much of the Old Testament is written in poetic form, and translators usually employ a poetic format for such passages quoted in the New Testament, but even some New Testament passages seem to have a significant liturgical character, and they also may well be printed in a poetic format. For example, Philippians 2.6-11 evidently reflects an ancient creedal statement; its verbal structure certainly suggests a series of statements which can be effectively reproduced in a poetic format of primary and secondary lines.

Quality in translation must also include such supplementary features as marginal notes, glossary, index, table of weights and measures, and maps. But all of these features must be made an integral part of the whole and not tacked-on almost as an afterthought when the translation of the text has been completed. The acceptance and influence of a translation over a period of years is directly proportionate to its quality. No amount of advertising or promotion can in the long run substitute for excellence in a product. Yet quality in translation should never be a motivation for meeting competition or for gaining an edge on the market. It should only be motivated by an earnest desire to interest and instruct the reader. And the success of a translation must be measured by the amount of time people will ultimately spend in reading it and how accurately it reveals to readers those truths contained in the Scriptures which will bring them enlightenment and blessing. The motivation for a quality translation is essentially the same motivation which prompts Christians to share the Good News with family, friends, neighbors and others throughout the world.