

***Translating the English Bible: From Relevance to Deconstruction*, by Philip Goodwin**

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“Translation of the Bible into English effectively ceased in 1611 with the completion of the KJV. Since that date there have been many revisions but no new interpretations” (28). This claim, remarkable in the light of the deluge of English translations over the past fifty years, is both the point of departure and the foil for the argument of this stimulating and challenging book. Beginning with a description of what he calls the “holy marriage” between the English language and the KJV, Goodwin employs relevance theory (RT) as a critical methodology to challenge both traditional translation tendencies and what might be called the Nida approach. Focusing on specific translation problems in Luke 1–2, he tackles issues relating to syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and literalness, before presenting his own “experimental translation” of the passage.

I want to highly commend this book to the reader, so rather than ending with my minor complaints let me discharge them here before proceeding to engage with the substance. The book is something of a copy-editor’s nightmare with unattributed quotations, missing citations and bibliographic items, displaced diagrams (e.g., 197–98), badly cut quotations, font problems with Greek and Hebrew in footnotes (e.g., “h)~san” for ἦσαν, 152 n. 2), and at least one egregious translation error (“with blood” for ὑδατι,

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181). These are frustrating rather than substantive, though they do raise the processing effort for the reader. They are possibly the result of the genre of the book (“published thesis”) and reflect the pressure to adapt and publish a thesis as quickly as possible.

Goodwin begins with a description of the notion that, when a language (English is initially one example, which comes to dominate) at a critical time in its literary development encounters a significant text in another language, the resulting engagement of language and text results in a “holy marriage” in which both text and language influence each other to the point of inseparability. The long period of unquestioned dominance of the KJV is evidence of this, and the association of words across languages determined by the KJV translators has blinded all subsequent interpreters to the limitations of the very idea of equivalence, let alone the specific choices. The frenetic translational activity of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, he argues, has produced no genuinely new interpretation, even if the language of delivery has changed. As a theory to break the log jam, he settles on Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory, applied to translation by Gutt. This is a good choice, and in his hands RT is sensitively and creatively used, but perhaps there is a lack of theoretical engagement with other voices. Like many writers before him, Goodwin rightly critiques Nida’s foundation on the linguistic deep-structures of Chomsky. But his engagement with Nida seems stalled at the 1969 *Theory and Practice of Translation*, as is the case with many writers from the biblical academy. The later Nida and the subsequent development of translation theory within the United Bible Societies following from and in tension with Nida are virtually ignored. Further, despite a whole section of his bibliography being dedicated to it, the burgeoning world of translation studies is scantily represented by some references to Venuti, Baker, Toury, and Nord. The orientation to purpose and to audience encouraged by *Skopostheorie* would have provided a valuable control for Goodwin’s critiques of translation.

That aside, Goodwin’s explanation of relevance theory and of Gutt’s application to translation is clear, concise, and highlights just the analytic tools he will put to excellent use in subsequent chapters. Most writers who have engaged translation with RT (notably Gutt and Hill) do so from missional motives and in service of the “holy marriage,” the tried and true interpretive tradition. One of the refreshing aspects of Goodwin’s work is that he takes RT in a somewhat different direction, and even if he barely reaches the “deconstruction” of his subtitle, he clearly demonstrates the falsehood of the frequent assumption that RT is simply a tool to bolster traditional interpretation and literal translation. Though for the most part

following Gutt, he offers two “modest proposals” of his own. The first is a graph of the “Relevance Curve” (67) plotting the effort of “processing cost” against the returns of “contextual implications.” However, he offers no explanation of the shape of the curve (bowed slightly upwards), and there is a degree of ambiguity in his descriptions about whether relevance is found *along* the curve or in the area *under* the curve. The second proposal is that readers bring differing levels of *attention* to a text and this operates as a variable that ensures the multivalence of texts. These are important contributions, but it is a pity that Goodwin does not engage a wider range of biblical RT scholarship, such as Green’s work on lexical pragmatics and the (admittedly few) translation scholars outside the world of Bible translation who have used RT. (On the other hand, he wrongly includes Wendland among the followers of Gutt. Wendland’s extensive work on literary biblical translation is not in the RT school and would have been valuable in itself for some of Goodwin’s concerns.)

In chapters 3–6 Goodwin addresses a number of distinct concerns in translation by focusing attention on aspects of Luke 1–2. The first is syntax, exemplified by the extraordinarily crafted but ambiguously connected prologue, Luke 1.1–4. Goodwin uses RT to establish a number of contextual implications that would have been derived by the first readers—deriving both from the referential content and the aesthetic and syntactic qualities. He then critically examines translations in commentaries by N. T. Wright, John Nolland, and Loveday Alexander to see how many of these implications would be derived from them, displayed in the results in helpful charts. Just here, however, considerations of purpose and audience of a translation seem to take a back seat. Goodwin’s own translation of the prologue is surprising and refreshing, relying on the arrangement of loosely connected sentences on the page to convey the implications of style, connectivity, and content. Each of these chapters makes brief reference to his experimental translation, but only here does he give any substantial background to his reasoning, and even here reference to the actual translation is slight. It would have been more helpful, at least to this reader, if he had been prepared to defend the translation in more detail.

Chapter 4 gives detailed attention to semantics, using the word ἱερεὺς in Luke 1.5 as a focus. The RT concept used is that of the complex method by which the human mind stores information about a word—as logical entry, lexical entry, and encyclopaedic entry—and Goodwin examines which of these provides the best point of contact between source and target contexts. Examining the various words used (or available) within Jewish, Greco-Roman, seventeenth-century, and contemporary contexts he seeks to break

the equivalence of ἱερεὺς = priest established by the “holy marriage.” His own choice, “Assessor,” is merely referred to as “one possible solution” without any significant defence.

Chapter 5 covers a wide range of further “communicative clues” suggested by Gutt, clues arising from semantic properties, syntactic properties, phonetic properties (the problem of proper names), semantic constraints on relevance, formulaic expressions, onomatopoeia, stylistic value of words, and sound-based poetic quality of words. To these Goodwin adds his own categories of redundancy, noun inflection, and tense morphology (this last at some length). Each is exemplified by specific cases from Luke 1–2. This chapter is like a virtuoso exercise, demonstrating the fluency, sensitivity, and breadth of vision that RT brings to the task of interpretation and translation, and silencing the critics who suggest that it leads only to “easy listening” or monovalent translations.

One further communicative clue is reserved for its own chapter: the repetitive texture of texts. Moving from common-sense intuitions about repetition of language, Goodwin charts a course between the casual pragmatism of contextual translation and the rigidity of literalness, examining several forms of literal translation along the way (not all of which would be immediately recognized as literal). His concern for careful attention to the function of repetitive texture and its sensitive treatment in translation, something that this reviewer has addressed in the past, is worthy of close attention. Ironically, both literalists (Ryken) and deconstructionists (Aichele) are interested in preserving rigorous concordance though from very different motivations, the one to maintain control over the meaning and the other to allow the text to deconstruct itself under its own internal tensions.

So what constitutes a “perfect translation”? For Goodwin it is one that is alert to all of the communicative clues in the source text and provides a new text with a range of possible interpretations depending on the reader’s attention, including interpretations that “cut against the grain of the text” (209).

What of Goodwin’s experimental translation itself? To provide an adequate assessment of it would require another extended review of its own. Suffice it to say that it is innovative, deliberate, varied in texture, and in places goes some way to breaking the shackles of the holy marriage (“Ya” for κύριος, “scorching” for anything involving ἅγιος, including “scorching breath” for πνεῦμα ἅγιον), while at other places seeming unable to quite break free (the swaddling clothes and the inn are still there).

This book makes a valuable new contribution to the discussion of Bible translation and the use of relevance theory in that task. It is highly recommended for anyone interested in the discipline. Although the focus is on English, it should be required reading for any thoughtful practitioners and teachers of the art of Bible translation into other languages.¹

¹ This review was originally published in *Review of Biblical Literature* 11/2014 (www.bookreviews.org). Used by permission of the Society of Biblical Literature. It is published here with minor stylesheet modifications.