

Digging for Gold – a Bible Study Course
Translations: the Bible in our hands

Introduction

Unless we can read the Bible in Hebrew or Greek we are dependent on translations, and therefore the ability of the translators. Translators try to combine accuracy and clarity – a difficult task. There are about 450 Bible translations in English alone so we need to know which are the most reliable. Ancient copies were made by hand on wax-covered tablets, papyrus or (more expensive) parchment: Jesus opened ‘the scroll’ (John 4:17). The invention of the printing press (1450, Johannes Gutenberg) was a spur to both literacy and new translations – which seem to multiply in line with technology. God has chosen to speak to us in words, which is why textual study and careful exegesis are essential. Words *do* matter.

Early texts and translations

1. OT: The exiles returning from Babylon were unfamiliar with Hebrew so Aramaic versions were produced, known as *Targums* (lit. ‘translations’). *The Septuagint* (LXX) was a Greek version produced for the Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt, around 350 BC; this was quoted by some NT writers. *The Masoretic Text* (Hebrew) was the work of Jewish scribes from 6th-10th c. AD using ancient manuscripts. *The Vulgate* was a translation of the whole Bible, largely the work of Jerome (4th c): the OT was based on Hebrew texts. The Masoretic Text is generally regarded as the most accurate.

2. NT: As the first language in NT Palestine (including that of Jesus) was Aramaic all quoted speech in the Gospels is itself a translation into Greek. There are two schools of NT translation: a) *the Received Text* (similar to the *Majority Text*) which is based on the body of manuscripts used for the older translations (notably the AV); b) *the Alexandrian Text* which makes use of the oldest extant manuscripts only discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries (especially *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*) – and favoured by many modern translators.

Issues facing translators

1. *The text to be used* (see above). This can affect whether some verses are included: note especially Mark 16:9-20, John 7:53-8:11, Acts 8:37, 1 John 5:7-8.
2. *Manuscript alternatives*. Note the large number of margin alternatives in the NIV (e.g. Ps. 8:5) - even a possible contradictory meaning (e.g. Ps. 16:3). Sometimes there is good manuscript evidence for alternatives (e.g. 1 Cor. 13:3, where one letter makes a difference between ‘to the flames’ (*kauthesomai*) and ‘that I may boast’ (*kauchesomai*)).
3. *Language differences*. No two languages translate exactly due to differences of grammar, syntax and vocabulary, e.g. Greek has 30 forms of the adjective ‘good’; two words for covenant (NT uses *diatheke* = obligation by one party, not *syntheke* = between equals). However, it is debatable whether some words are used interchangeably or in distinction (note especially, *logos/rhema* and *phileo/agape*). As there is no aorist tense in English the translator has to choose between meanings that can affect the interpretation, e.g. Acts 19:2 (‘received the Holy Spirit’ *when* you believed, or *after?*).
4. *The influence of their own theological position*. Can translators be entirely objective? – every translation involves some level of interpretation. Evangelicals tend to favour versions where fellow evangelicals were well represented on the translation team, e.g. the NIV and ESV. The AV reflects the ecclesiology of its episcopal majority, e.g. ‘bishops’ rather than ‘overseers’ (thus too JB Phillips translates ‘pastor’ as ‘priest’). Conversely, Moffatt – ‘this represents my body’ (the text = ‘this my body’). Sometimes a mistranslation can perpetuate wrong theology (Jesus did *not* say, ‘...my body broken for you’).

Three kinds of translation

1. Literal – word-for-word: e.g. *Authorised Version 1611 (King James)*, *Revised Version 1885*, *Revised Standard Version 1951*, *New American Standard Bible 1971*, *New King James Bible 1982*, *English Standard Version 2001* (note: *ESV* is very close to the 1971 *RSV* update)

Pros: Aims to be faithful to ‘original’ **words**, keeps close to the standard Hebrew and Greek texts. Retains theological words (e.g. justification, atonement, covenant). Least interpretative.
Cons: The English can seem unnatural (e.g. too many ‘ands’, archaic phrases, unusual word order), colloquialisms and ancient measurements (e.g. cubits, ‘sixth hour’) are retained but are not readily understood today.

2. Dynamic equivalent: e.g., *New English Bible 1961 (now Revised English Bible)*, *New International Version 1973*, *Good News Bible (Today’s English Version) 1976*

Pros: Aims to ‘keep the distance’ on most history, facts, customs’ while updating, and sometimes simplifying, the language so that it has the same impact as it had on the original hearers. It looks for equivalent **meaning** rather than words.

Cons: Sometimes weakens theological meaning (note especially NIV ‘one and only son’, cf AV ‘only begotten son’).

3. Free paraphrase – ‘It’s the **thought that counts’:** e.g. ‘*Letters to Young Churches*’ (*JB Phillips*) 1947, *Living Bible* 1971, *The Message* 1993, *Contemporary English Version* 1995 (controversial). Note that most of these are the work of an individual.

Pros: Aims for readability, contemporary impact and relevance. Can ‘light up’ a verse (e.g. *JBP*, Rom. 12:2 - ‘Don’t let the world... squeeze you into its own mould’ and ‘Rom. 3:20 - ‘the straight edge of the law shows us how crooked we are’).

Cons: The changes often take the translation out of the ‘world of the Bible’ (e.g. *JBP*, ‘handshake’ instead of ‘holy kiss’; *CEV*, ‘feast of thin bread’ instead of ‘feast of unleavened bread’); can even alter the doctrinal meaning (e.g. *LB*, ‘special abilities’ instead of ‘spiritual gifts’), or de-symbolise the text (e.g. *LB*, ‘Rome’ instead of ‘Babylon’ in Revelation).

Additional note: Several modern translations are gender neutral which makes them more acceptable in contemporary society,

Some practical issues

1. A literal translation is necessary for study and (usually) preaching. Paraphrase versions should not be used as a main Bible.

2. Older versions that use archaic language (e.g. ‘Thees and Thous’) should not be used, especially *AV* 1611, and *RV*.

3. The Good News Bible is particularly suitable for those who are learning English and for children.

4. As we are at a historical, geographical, linguistic and cultural distance from the world of the original writing a study Bible can be very useful, especially as it gives immediate access to a commentary.

5. Familiarity with one main translation is helpful for remembering ‘the Word’, but when preparing ministry it is often enlightening to compare versions.

Conclusion

We need to maintain a passion for the integrity and unchangeability of the biblical text (John 10:35, Rev. 22:19) so that we do not in any way distort it (2 Cor. 4:2).