

QUESTIONS OF TRANSLATION

Nicholas King

Not Another Bible Translation?

LATELY, AND SLIGHTLY to my astonishment, not to mention the bemusement of several friends, I have completed and published a translation of the Bible,¹ and the editor of *The Way* in his kindness suggested that it might be good to reflect with readers on the sort of questions that arise in connection with an enterprise of this kind.

Some of my acquaintances, on hearing that yet another bible translation was in prospect, have asked, ‘Surely that has already been done?’ Others, of a more scholarly bent, when they gathered that it was a translation of the Greek Bible, not merely the New Testament but also the LXX,² enquired why on earth one would produce a translation of a translation. The short answer is that the LXX is the version of the Bible that is standardly cited by our New Testament authors; that the existing manuscripts of it are centuries older than those of the Hebrew scriptures and in some cases preserve manifestly superior readings; and that it serves as a reminder that the scriptural texts were at no stage ‘set in stone’ until the invention of movable type in the late fifteenth century gave us the illusion of an unchanging book called ‘The Bible’.³ It was (and remains) a ramshackle and in part random collection of writings that spoke to our Jewish ancestors, and subsequently to those first Christians who cherished the memory of the risen Jesus.

The Hermeneutical Problem

All the questions above are a subset of that other set of questions concerning how any human being can possibly understand any other, even when they

¹ *The Bible: A Study Bible Freshly Translated by Nicholas King* (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2013). Both the complete Bible and individual sections are available from The Way Ignatian Book Service.

² The Septuagint (Latin for ‘seventy’) is the name given to the Greek translation made of the Hebrew scriptures from the third century BC onwards, for Jews who had forgotten the ancestral tongue.

³ If I am to be brutally honest, it is also the case that my Greek is stronger than my Hebrew.

appear to have a shared language;⁴ and this set of questions becomes even more complicated when we apply them to the possibility of understanding a God whom we cannot hear, see or touch. How can anyone understand such a being? An apparently simple answer is ‘just open the pages of the Bible, and God will speak to you’. There are several difficulties here, of which I should like to mention just two. The first is that ‘the Bible’ referred to in this catch-all slogan is almost always the version most familiar to the person who utters it, normally in their own vernacular tongue. The second is that even if you have a grasp of the three languages in which our Bible is written, you cannot be sure of what the original actually said. There are two reasons for this. First, our Bible comes down to us in thousands of manuscripts, and it is of the nature of manuscripts that they are all different, so we cannot be sure of the ‘original’ text. Secondly, our grasp of the three ancient languages, and especially the Hebrew of most of the Old Testament, is nowhere near as complete as modern vernacular translations would have you suppose. Therefore we do not always know what it meant.

So, hermeneutics is difficult; and, indeed, I should be inclined to say that all translations (including my own) fail. So I tell my students that that



Scenes from the life of Jacob, from the sixth-century Vienna Genesis

⁴ Questions of this sort are called ‘hermeneutical’ because the function of the god Hermes was to interpret between gods and human beings.

is why they must all learn all three of the languages of the Bible; however not everyone is in a position to do that, and it must be said that something happens when people read the Bible, in whatever language. Indeed when two people who do not share a language attempt to communicate, very often, and against all the odds, they succeed. It follows that hermeneutics is not impossible, but (at the same time) that it is thoroughly mysterious.

The mysteriousness and the difficulty are increased when it comes to the mystery that (with deceptive ease) we call 'God'. For the fact is that human beings do have a sense of encountering God when they dip into the pages of the Bible, and that they hear an unmistakable voice that is unmistakably not their own; where does this come from, and is it simply a delusion? Perhaps the experience of attempting a translation may offer some help.

What Happens When You Translate?

It used to be thought that there were just two approaches to translation; either you paid attention to the source-language or you paid attention to the target-language. These were known as 'formal equivalence' and 'dynamic equivalence'.⁵ When, as school-children, we were taught to write Greek and Latin prose, our teachers wanted us to imitate distinguished writers such as Thucydides or Demosthenes, Cicero or Tacitus: that, I suppose, was 'dynamic equivalence', and there was a pleasing sense of triumph in getting it right. If, however, you are translating a manual telling you how to operate a machine, then you need more precision, and that argues for 'formal equivalence', where you are prepared to pay a price, sacrificing elegance in the target-language for closeness to the original. Interestingly enough, this 'formal equivalence' is the aim of the family of bible translations that come down from the King James Version (Revised Version, Revised Standard Version, and New Revised Standard Version), while the Good News Version, which often arouses the contempt of sober judges, is aiming for 'dynamic equivalence'. Part of the charm of the King James Version is that it sometimes sounds like the Hebrew that it is rendering. So 'dying you shall die', or 'speaking he spake' represents a particular grammatical construction in Hebrew, which serves to emphasize the action of the verb, but is a borrowing in English.

⁵ Here is a chronological list of some recent works on bible translation. Some may reflect that they come in descending order of readability: Ronald Knox, *On Englishing the Bible* (London: Burns and Oates, 1949); Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Lynne Long, *Translating the Bible* (London: Ashgate 2001); Anthony Pym, *Exploring Translation Theories* (London: Routledge, 2010).

‘Formal equivalence’, however, does not always win you friends. It is the preferred style of those who produced the recent official Catholic translation of the Roman missal; and it seems that almost no one whose terms of employment do not actually compel them to support it has a good word to say for this new version, apart from those loyal Catholics who suggest that we ‘just get on with it’. Interestingly, however, people’s reasons for disliking it are widely varied: some object to ‘dewfall’, others to ‘oblation’, others again to the impossibly obscure Latinate sentences in which this translation is clothed, and a very large number to ‘for many’ in the words of institution rather than our familiar ‘for all’. Perhaps all this points to an unease felt by many of the faithful, not so much with particular translations, as about the process by which this version was produced in the first place. So it is not, perhaps, this particular rendering rather than another which has annoyed people, so much as their general, if slightly unfair, sense that it was a matter of ‘faceless bureaucrats’ engaged in a rather hole-in-the-corner procedure in pursuit of a particular agenda. This had the painful result that a change was made in the English liturgy about which they had come to care a great deal.

In fairness, however, it must be said that whenever you translate a familiar and beloved text you must expect irritation. In the case of my own translation, the following four instances aroused the wrath of some readers. First was the word ‘munch’; I used this word towards the end of chapter 6 of John’s Gospel, where the evangelist has Jesus, in the face of mounting criticism from his audience, as he encourages them to ‘eat the flesh of the Son of Man’, suddenly⁶ switch from the normal Greek word for ‘eat’ to another word, which in meaning is closer to what animals do than to human eating. For this I was roundly criticized (on a radio programme) for employing a term that has, so I was told, ‘sexual connotations’. One cannot be too careful, it seems.

The second instance was the use of the word ‘congratulations’ in the beatitudes that start Matthew’s version of the Sermon on the Mount.⁷ It came to me quite suddenly, when I was asked, in the Church of the Beatitudes above the Sea of Galilee, to read the beatitudes, and had only a Greek New Testament with me. So I translated that, and instead of using the more normal translation of ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’, I instinctively translated the Greek word *makarioi* in each case as ‘congratulations’. I suspect that at the

⁶ At 6: 54.

⁷ Matthew 5: 3–12.

back of my mind was the related Greek word *macarismos*, which certainly is used to denote 'congratulation'. As it turned out, those gathered there, gazing out over the Lake, very much liked that translation, and I have used it ever since. My defence, now I have had time to reflect on the matter, is that 'congratulations', a word often used in the discourse of principal teachers on prize days, has a very jarring effect when Jesus is applying it to 'the poor in spirit ... those who mourn ... the meek ...'. It is rather as if a school head were to congratulate those pupils who had carved their initials on the door of the Director of Studies or planted cannabis bushes behind the bicycle sheds. It was, however, an instinctive choice, where (as so often in the process of translation) the subconscious was way ahead of the conscious mind.

My third example goes right back to when I first embarked upon the project. At that stage I had no notion that I was translating the Bible; it was simply that I had a bit of leisure and was due to give summer schools in New Jersey on the Gospels of Mark and John. So I did what I had always wanted to do, and sat down and translated them both, straight off. And because I was aware that chapter and verse indicators were medieval impositions on the text, which occasionally distort the author's intention, I omitted them. When it came to publishing the New Testament translation we continued this policy, though because it had been pointed out to me that readers needed to know where they were in the text, I decided to divide it into sections, at the end of each of which I put a heading with chapter and verse, and, at the end of each section, a comment on what had been going on. It did not work very well, however, though I think that the intention was good, simply because people could not track down a particular verse. So when it came to translating the Old Testament, we agreed to keep the numbers for verse and chapter, but ask the printers to keep them small. Which was the correct policy?

A fourth example was less instinctive on my part. It concerns the Greek word *ioudaios* and its plural *ioudaioi*. Originally this is a transcription into Greek of the Hebrew word *yehudim*, referring to the inhabitants of the province of Judah. In English, therefore, it can be translated as either 'Jew' or 'Judean'. In John's Gospel there are many points where it sounds appallingly anti-Semitic⁸ if you translate it as 'Jew', so I tend always in the Fourth Gospel to write 'Judean', and that quite often works, where, for example, the word is contrasted with 'Galilean',⁹ but I am aware that

⁸ See John 8: 48, for example.

⁹ For example at 7: 1.



The YouVersion bible app, in Vietnamese, Korean and Russian

I am pushing it when it refers to the feast of Sukkoth.¹⁰ However it seems a price worth paying if one is to help undo the long and shameful Christian history of anti-Semitism. Is that translation or something else?

This leads me to another instance of translation, one that involves a change from the original. In Hebrew, the Christian formula for the sign of the cross¹¹ is today as follows: *beshem ha'ab vehabben veruach haqqodesh elohim 'ehad*, where *elohim 'ehad* ('one God') is technically ungrammatical, since *elohim* ('God') is plural, while *'ehad* means 'one', and is necessarily singular. Clearly those who did the translation were aware of the sensitivity of the other great monotheisms, Judaism and Islam, and so inserted this (entirely orthodox) affirmation of the oneness of God into the standard formula. Is this translation or something else?

What Are You Doing When You Translate the Bible?

In this final section I should like to argue that bible translation is different from other sorts of translation, and that the stakes are higher than when you translate Shakespeare into Japanese, Dostoevsky into Welsh, or Gerard Manley Hopkins into almost any language that you care to name.

Back in 1974 Nida and Tabor estimated that 'at least 3,000' people were 'engaged primarily in the translation of the Bible into some 800

¹⁰ Which happens in the very next verse, 7: 21

¹¹ *In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*, which comes into English as 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. The original is at Matthew 28: 19.

languages, representing about 80 percent of the world's population'.¹² For all that this is thought to be a secular age, there is no evidence at all of any decline in these numbers in the intervening forty years—rather the reverse. Indeed every Christmas the British newspapers publish articles, often of a very fundamentalist sort, about the star that the magi followed, and at Easter-time you will find a very similar, if not wholly expert, interest in the texts that are read in churches during Holy Week. Publishers, who are not generally in the business of giving their money away, frequently commission new translations of the Bible, presumably because they know that people are going to buy them.

Not only that, but translations of the Bible, often done in new and exciting ways, seem to abound.¹³ Inevitably, perhaps, this increases the possibility of people getting cross with this or that rendition, but that very crossness shows that those people genuinely care about bible translation, whereas the translation of other literature is greeted more serenely. It seems to me possible to argue a case—which secularist commentators would indignantly reject—that this is because, somewhere beneath the surface of the text, readers are used to hearing what we may call the 'voice of God'. It is tricky to express this accurately; I am not suggesting that there is anything magical about the scriptures. It is rather that there is something about this collection of many different kinds of literature, preserved for us in apparently arbitrary ways, that expresses to us the undying truth that all is well in the world, and that there is a meaning and a purpose to the whole of creation and to our own lives (in other words, that God exists). This is a truth that people long to hear; and, my claim is, underneath the millions of words that the Bible contains, there is only the one Word unceasingly uttered by the Father. Our task is to hear that unchanging Word, be challenged by its loving invitation, and then proclaim it to a world that longs to hear it. Translation, thus understood, is a very flexible and multifaceted activity; so that when Pope Francis hugs a child with Down's Syndrome, or washes the feet of a Muslim woman prisoner, the gospel is being preached and the Word is being spoken. He is, we may say, translating the Bible.

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¹² *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 1

¹³ I have myself been involved in not-yet-completed translations into sign-language and cartoon form, and with a Bible Society translation of the New Testament into the Patamona language.

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