

TURNING BABEL ON ITS HEAD: TRANSLATING FOR UNDERSTANDING

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Introduction

“Can you read this book?” The elderly man posing the question was the principal of an Islamic day school or *madrassa* housed in a mosque. Squatting beside me as I sat on the floor, he held the book in his outstretched right hand, indicating that I should take it. Approximately forty young students between the ages of eight and fifteen sat around us on the floor of one of the mosque’s classrooms. With a few softly spoken words he instructed a student to take the Qur’an off its stand on the mat in front of us and to put it away. Thus he summarily altered the scheduled reading of the Islamic holy book. Perhaps he was being extravagantly gracious and hospitable to the two American missionaries. Then again, he might have been deeply interested in what this new book had to say. Obtaining his permission to choose what text I would read, I opened the book and began to read. When I completed the passage, the gentleman snatched the book from my hands and continued to read aloud to the end of the chapter. The book was the New Testament in the Muslim Bengali vernacular, a translation produced by Dr. Viggo B. Olsen, our guest respondent today. Luke 5:12-39 was the text that the Muslim cleric had participated in reading to the young Muslim students.

Common Language for Common People

Five hundred years earlier, on the opposite side of the world, an Italian duke desired a sparrowhawk. He wrote to a village mayor requesting in formal Latin that a sparrowhawk (*accipetrem*) be captured, tied up in a sack, and sent to him. When the letter was delivered, the villagers became very concerned. They understood it as a demand for the seizure and delivery of their popular archpriest (*arciprete* in their common Italian dialect). They knew of no reason why the duke should be so displeased with the priest, but felt compelled to fulfill his decree. Therefore, the bewildered priest was seized, tied

¹ The title for this address was inspired by George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1998) and is in harmony with Glen Scorgie’s comment that Pentecost affirmed “that Babel was not to be God’s final and fateful verdict on the human race”—Glen G. Scorgie, “Introduction and Overview,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World*, ed. by Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 21.

up, placed in a sack, and delivered to the duke's palace. At the palace the receiving official was baffled. "Do you have a letter?" he asked. A reading of the letter revealed the nature of the misunderstanding. Duke Borso, in a diplomatic move to preserve the villagers' face, returned the priest with a letter informing them that he had changed his mind and that they could free the priest. From that time onward, the duke was careful to write his letters in the common language of his village subjects.²

Duke Borso's mistaken use of extraordinary and formal language to communicate with ordinary folk has, unfortunately, been repeated over and over again in the history of the Christian church. In obedience to the Great Commission, Bible translators are attempting to convey the gospel message about Jesus Christ to every possible language group. Too often, however, translators have chosen to employ formal language instead of a common vernacular (i.e., the common language of the common person). The elderly gentleman in the *madrassa* was enthusiastic about the translation of the New Testament in the Muslim Bengali dialect because it was in his language. It was not translated in a Hindu dialect, nor did the translators choose a Christianized Bengali ignoring common Islamic vocabulary. He could understand what was read and he could easily read it for himself. Within a very short time of its publication, the MBCL³ New Testament became the number one best selling book in the three thousand-year history of Bengali literature. That success was due in part to the type of language employed—neither puerile nor formal, neither overly conversational nor overly literary.

The MBCL New Testament is a latter day example of a long history of Bible translations. At times the church has avoided vernacular translations, resulting in a divided church with two factions consisting of a scholarly, cloistered clergy and a biblically illiterate laity. In the period of history leading up to the Reformation, the debate had intensified between adherents to either a formal language or a common language in Bible translation. Scholars agree that Scriptures in the vernacular were catalysts for the Reformation. David Daniell is very specific:

The energy which affected every human life in Northern Europe, however, came from a different place. It was not the result of political imposition. It came from the discovery of the Word of God as originally written, from Matthew—indeed, from Genesis—to Revelation, in the language of the people.⁴

However, vernacular translation was not a concept that had suddenly made its appearance for the first time in the history of the church, as we shall see when we discuss Luther's German translation.

From a pragmatic point of view, Bible translations must be readable and understandable. Just because the Bible is an ancient and religious work does not mean that an English translation must sound as though Venerable Bede himself had been resuscitated to write it in the patois of the thirteenth century, or that a Bengali translation must employ extinct Sanskrit to provide terminology unavailable in modern Bengali.

² Clifton Fadiman, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown & Co., 1985), 197-98.

³ Muslim Bengali Common Language. *Injil Sharif* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangladesh Bible Society, 1980).

⁴ David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1994), 58. Daniell also reminds us, "that during the English Reformation, lay men and women were so hungry for the Bible in English that they were often prepared to die for it" (100).

Unfortunately, many Bible translations employ a Hebrew-flavored language, be it in English, German, Bengali, or Swahili. Authors of non-biblical works normally do not write “The President of the United States opened his mouth and spoke” or “Michael Jordan dreamed a dream last night.” Why then should Amos 4:2-3 be retained in a rendering that is practically incomprehensible? Consider the KJV’s translation:

The Lord GOD hath sworn by his holiness, that, lo, the days shall come upon you, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks. And ye shall go out at the breaches, every *cow at that which is* before her, and ye shall cast *them* into the palace, saith the LORD.

Is this rendering as understandable in its English to modern day readers as it was in its original Hebrew to those who heard Amos proclaim its message? Please note that this is a question concerning *equal* understanding, not a *different* understanding. I am not advocating an interpretive translation that would exceed what God gave to Israel in Amos’ day. In its long history of translating Scripture, has the church found the way to translate such a passage with clarity, naturalness, readability, beauty, orality, and dignity?⁵

A Greek Old Testament for Greek-Speaking Jews

Even before the time of Christ the Hebrew Bible had been translated into Greek in order to make it more widely available to both Jew and Gentile who had little or no knowledge of biblical Hebrew. The Jewish translators who gathered in Alexandria, Egypt in the middle of the third century B.C. permanently changed the history of the Bible. For the first time men translated the Bible into a non-biblical language rather than continuing to transmit it in its original languages (the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament). The resultant translation in the Greek has come to be known as the Septuagint, meaning “seventy.” The title originated from the tradition that seventy-two Jewish scholars had participated in the translation of the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).⁶ “Seventy” was apparently selected as a nice round number for identification.

The Septuagint was the Bible of choice when the apostles were writing the New Testament. Where they wished to quote from the Old Testament, New Testament writers chose to utilize the Septuagint up to 75 percent of the time.⁷ In the early centuries of the Christian church the church fathers relied heavily on the Septuagint in writing their treatises and commentaries. When translations were made of the Scriptures, they were based upon the Septuagint, as Conybeare and Stock indicate:

Some four centuries after that era St. Augustine remarks that the Greek-speaking Christians for the most part did not even know

⁵ These characteristics are listed by Scorgie, “Introduction and Overview,” 25. A similar list is provided by Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002), 287-93 (“Conclusion: What Makes the Best Bible Translation?”): accuracy, fidelity, effective diction, theological orthodoxy, preserving multiple meanings, full exegetical potential, expecting the best from readers, transparency, reliability, respect for poetry, excellence of rhythm, dignity, and beauty.

⁶ For an excellent introduction to the study of the Septuagint, see Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic/Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000).

⁷ The figure depends on the scholar being cited. Cf. *ibid.*, 189.

whether there was any other word of God than the Septuagint (*C.D.* XVIII, 43). So when other nations became converted to Christianity and wanted the Scriptures in their own tongues, it was almost always the Septuagint which formed the basis of the translation. This was so in the case of the early Latin version, which was in use before the Vulgate; and it was so also in the case of the translations made into Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, and other languages. The only exception to the rule is the first Syriac version, which was made direct from the Hebrew.⁸

The Greek of the Septuagint is Jewish Hellenistic Greek. “It was written by Jews who lived in the Hellenistic era.”⁹ Linguistically, Septuagint Greek is not really a dialect. It was not a formal literary Greek as much as it was the spoken Greek of the Jewish community. The language of the Greek Old Testament reflects the interests of the Hellenistic Jewish community by its vocabulary and style.¹⁰ It was, indeed, a vernacular translation.

A Bible for English Ploughmen

Nearly 1600 years later, John Wycliffe (1330-1384), the “morning star of the Reformation,” declared that the Scripture should be available in a language the common people could understand. He argued that God gave the Scriptures for all mankind:

Christ and His Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them. It is certain that the truth of the Christian faith becomes more evident the more faith itself is known. Therefore, the doctrine should not only be in Latin but in the vulgar tongue and, as the faith of the church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in a true sense the better. The laity ought to understand the faith and, as doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand.¹¹

Spurred on by his belief, Wycliffe pioneered the translation of the Bible into English. The Roman Catholic Church, however, considered any Bible translation in the common language of the people to be heretical. Henry Knighton, a Catholic chronicler of Wycliffe’s time wrote that

Christ gave His Gospel to the clergy and the learned doctors of the Church so that they might give it to the laity and to weaker persons, according to the message of the season and personal need. But this Master John Wyclif translated the Gospel from Latin into the English—the Angle not the angel language. And Wyclif, by thus translating the Bible, made it the property of the masses and common to all and more open to the laity, and even to women who were able to read . . . And so the pearl of the Gospel is thrown before swine and trodden underfoot and what is meant to be the treasure both of clergy

⁸ F. C. Conybeare and St. George Stock, *Grammar of Septuagint Greek: With Selected Readings, Vocabularies, and Updated Indexes* ([Peabody, Mass.]: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995 reprint of 1905 ed.), 19-20.

⁹ Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ “Why Wycliffe Translated the Bible into English,” *Christian History* 2/2 (1983): 26.

and laity is now become a joke of both. The jewel of the clergy has been turned into the sport of the laity, so that what used to be the highest gift of the clergy and the learned members of the Church has become common to the laity.¹²

It has been said that Wycliffe's translation determined which English dialect would become the standard. Wycliffe himself, however, did not have direct influence on the establishment of Midland English as the standardized common language of England. That development was affected more by the prominence of London and by England's geography and demographics.¹³ On the other hand, it would be correct to say that the tyranny of the clergy and their Latin was broken when Wycliffe took his theological reasoning to the common people in the common language.¹⁴ This rise of the English vernacular was of "double significance. It was a victory of the people's language over the Latin language of the learned few, and at the same time it was the victory of a popular vernacular (English) over what in England was an aristocratic vernacular (French)."¹⁵

Erasmus had prefaced his Greek New Testament with the following wish:

I would wish even all women to read the gospel and the epistles of St Paul, and I wish that they were translated into all languages of all Christian people, that they might be read and known, not merely by the Scotch and the Irish, but even by the Turks and the Saracens. I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at his plow, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle, that the traveler may with their narratives beguile the weariness of the way.¹⁶

Erasmus was "never far from William Tyndale's mind,"¹⁷ so it is no surprise that his response to a learned opponent to vernacular translation echoed Erasmus' wish: "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost."¹⁸

German Bibles for Germany

Yet another great Bible translator in the period of the Reformation was Martin Luther. Tyndale relied heavily upon Luther's translation for his own English renderings. Luther's nailing of his ninety-five theses to the cathedral door at Wittenberg has overshadowed his role in the translation of the Scriptures. Actually, he was not the first to translate the Bible into German. Reumann describes those earlier German translations as follows:

Ufilas had put the Bible into Gothic before he died in A.D. 383, thus providing the oldest literary monument in a Germanic language. There are fragments preserved of a Frankish translation of Matthew, dated A.D. 738. Some unknown "German Tatian" provided a harmony of the gospels through a ninth-century translation. By the end of the Middle

¹² Ibid., quoting Henry Knighton.

¹³ Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 191-95.

¹⁴ Ibid., 205.

¹⁵ Daniel Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Random House, 1983), 523.

¹⁶ J. F. Mozley, *William Tyndale* (1937), 34; cited in Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 67.

¹⁷ Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 43.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

Ages, German manuscripts of the Bible numbered in the thousands. What is more, there were also German translations in print before Luther's day. The first printed Bible in any modern European language was the German version from the press of Johann Mentelin of Strassburg in 1466, and that translation went back to the fourteenth century. In all, four Low German translations and fourteen High German had appeared in print before Luther ever began his work. Eight to ten thousand vernacular copies were on the market, each costing the equivalent of a town house or fourteen oxen.¹⁹

That Strassburg printing in 1466 was a German translation of the Latin Vulgate. Within fifty years it went through eighteen editions. Indeed, the German laity had demonstrated already how highly they prized the Bible in the vernacular.

In every area of Christian endeavor, the labor of one individual is often multiplied many times over by those whom he or she has influenced. A seemingly endless chain of interrelated ministries grows into an overflowing river of blessing. So it was with Luther's Bible translation in the vernacular German. It became the catalyst for a number of Reformation Bibles:

- Low German translations based on Luther's High German.
- Dutch translation of Luther's New Testament (1523).
- Danish New Testament (1524) heavily dependent on Luther's German translation.
- Swedish New Testament (1526) by a blacksmith's son who had attended Luther's lectures.
- Icelandic New Testament (1540) borrowed extensively from Luther.
- Finnish Bible translation (1548-52) begun by a Finn acquainted with Luther.
- Modern Greek Pentateuch (1547).
- The Gospels in Polish (1551-52).
- A Hebrew New Testament (by 1600) for missionary work among Jews.
- Slovenian Bible (1584) published at Wittenberg.
- Croatian New Testament (1562-63) for Slavs.
- Prior to 1555 the English translations of Tyndale and Coverdale were influenced by Luther's work.²⁰

All of these translations had a common thread: they were translations for the people in the language of the people. A Bible in the language of the learned or the aristocracy might not serve as a Bible for the people. Since the Word of God is for all people, it must be made available in the language of the people. It is incumbent upon every translation team to identify the level and style of the common people's language. A Bible translation in any other level or style would be a step backward toward the pre-

¹⁹ John H. P. Reumann, *The Romance of Bible Scripts and Scholars: Chapters in the History of Bible Transmission and Translation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), 58. Cf. Matthew H. Black, "The Printed Bible," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. by S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 3:423: "It has been calculated that altogether 8000-10,000 copies were printed: which indicates a considerable market, when it is remembered that early editions probably cost (as Vulgates also must have cost) the equivalent of a town house, or fourteen fattened oxen. From the evidence of bequests, most vernacular Bibles were owned by laymen—which is what one would expect."

²⁰ Reumann, *The Romance of Bible Scripts and Scholars*, 72-73.

Reformation tyranny of a professional priesthood. The translators' choice of language is determined by their beliefs concerning the authority of Scripture, the priesthood of the believer, the role of the church, and the universality of the gospel. It was not a mere coincidence that those who held these doctrines were also the champions of common language translations in the Reformation.

God's Word was never intended to be the property solely of the clergy. In the Old Testament the Lord instructed the people of Israel to obey Him. In the New Testament Christ spoke His parables and taught his doctrine to the common people of Palestine. He did not remain in the Temple to teach only the doctors of the Mosaic Law.

Obedience Proportionate to Understanding

Bible translation in the vernacular is rooted and grounded in the teaching of the Word of God itself. The purpose of divine communication with mankind is that a person might know who God is and what God requires. As our incoming regional chairman has penned, "In Bible translation, faithfulness to the original meaning of a text is important, but it is not enough. The other critical test is what it enables its readers to understand."²¹ One can neither believe nor understand what one has not heard or read. What is heard or read cannot be obeyed if it has not been understood. God's Word in an understandable language is the necessary spiritual stimulus which elicits a divinely approved response.

The challenge of Bible translation, therefore, is to make the Word of God understandable. It is one of the greatest challenges to which the Christian exegete or expositor can respond. Understanding is the goal of all proclamation of Scripture (cf. Matt 13:13-15, 19, 23). Without understanding the Scriptures, a person is unable to implement biblical instruction through obedience and without obedience there is no divine blessing. The more accurate one's understanding, the more exact the obedience and the fuller the resultant blessing.

The most efficient medium for understanding the Scriptures is one's own language—the language of his or her everyday existence. When we are in dire straits and cry out to God for help, we do so in our own language, our own heart's language. No matter how many languages we speak, it is that one language in which we most readily pray and dream. That is the target language for the Bible translator. It is the common language of the common people in any one cultural setting. It might be Arabic or Zulu, Bengali or Yaqui, Chinese or Xhosa. It could be a major tongue or a small tribal tongue. No matter what its identity or linguistic behavior, it is the heart language of a people to whom God's Word should be proclaimed. They are a people, a language group, for whom Christ's redemptive work was accomplished. They have been redeemed "from every tribe *and tongue* and people and nation" (Rev 5:9, NAU, emphasis added).

Translating the Bible into the common language of common people is an uncommon challenge that produces an uncommon reward. Each of us has had the joy of explaining some aspect of life to an eager young learner. It may have been something as theologically profound as the Trinity or as down-to-earth as gravity. We may have utilized amazing plants like the venus flytrap and the closing leaves of a mimosa to explain the marvels of creation. In any case, there was no greater reward than to see that young person's glowing countenance when understanding dawned. Beaming faces and

²¹ Scorgie, "Introduction and Overview," 20.

shining eyes are all the more thrilling to witness when the dawn of spiritual understanding comes through the instrumentality of an understandable translation of the Bible.

However, what would at first blush seem to be a snap proves to be a heavy task. Leland Ryken rightly warns that

the fact that God stooped to human understanding when he revealed his truth in human words does not itself settle the question of how simple or sophisticated, how transparent or complex, the Bible is. Human language encompasses an immense range of simplicity and difficulty. Nor does the fact that God accommodated himself to human understanding in itself say anything about the level of intelligence and artistic sophistication possessed by the writers and assumed audience of the Bible.²²

While preaching in Bengali in Bangladesh, I often employed illustrations from their poet laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. What amazed me was that even the little children would stop their fussing and fidgeting as soon as they heard Tagore's words. It was scary—you could hear a pin drop. Tagore's language was simple, yet majestic. He did not choose the elevated language employed by William Yates' 1844 translation of Scripture, nor did he choose the lowest level of language that we tended at times to prefer as foreign speakers looking for simplicity and directness. True understanding does not negate high literary standards. Tagore was the Bengali wordsmith par excellence. His example would be the best to follow. Just how does one go about doing that? It begins with the "ABC's" of spelling and extends through the employment of literary devices. Of all the SBCL Old Testament, I consider our Psalms translation to come the nearest to the standards reflected in Tagore's poems.

Before we move on, let's consider one example of how literary considerations can enrich a common language translation. In Deuteronomy 23:2-3 (Heb. 3-4) certain individuals are barred from entering the LORD's assembly even "to the tenth generation" (ESV). The addition of "none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever" at the end of verse 3 (Heb. 4) would seem to indicate that "to the tenth generation" is the equivalent of "never." The phrase is not to be understood literally as allowing the eleventh generation to enter the assembly. At the time our SBCL team was discussing this passage, I was reading widely in secular Bengali literature. A number of times I had come across the idiom "until the fourteenth generation." The Bangladeshi members of the team confirmed that it meant "never"—just like the Hebrew "until the tenth generation." Therefore, both SBCL and MBCL translations employ "until the fourteenth generation" as the best way to retain the use of an idiom for an equivalent idiom with more pleasing literary results than merely translating it as "never."

How Can They Understand?

As mentioned above, even spelling is important when it comes to Bible translation. A spelling mistake can turn a serious text into a real laugh. Take, for example, a seminary student's translation of Genesis 37:34 as "he put sack cloth around his waste." Instead of Jacob wrapping himself with sackcloth as a symbol of his mourning, the reader pictures him bagging his trash (or worse). Attention to detail must be

²² Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 67-68.

the hallmark of every translator. Accuracy depends upon it. Understanding depends upon it.

No word is too small or lacking in significance. Let's consider what happens when translators ignore just one little word. The command of the Holy Spirit in Acts 13:2 is commonly translated as something like, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (NASB; cf. KJV, NKJV, ESV, NRSV, NIV). All of these translations ignore the little word $\delta\eta$ that follows the imperative "set apart" in the Greek text. Translators have often treated that word as though it were nothing more than a marker of "relatively weak emphasis—'then, indeed' or frequently not translated but possibly reflected in the word order."²³ Nida and Louw suggest the translation, "set apart for me, then, Barnabas and Saul to do the work for which I have called them."²⁴ However, A. T. Robertson, the venerable Greek scholar, indicated that although this Greek particle was difficult to translate it is strongly emphatic.²⁵ Combined with an imperative (as in Acts 13:2), it has a "note of urgency."²⁶ The nature of the particle is such that it should not be omitted from the translation of the verse.²⁷ Consideration should be given, therefore, to translating the Holy Spirit's command in such a way that it conveys the concept of "do it immediately." Liddell and Scott in their premier Greek lexicon support Robertson's view of the particle by indicating that it is "used to give greater *exactness*, to the word or words which it influences ... *I now, in truth, indeed, surely, really.*"²⁸

In the Bengali SBCL and MBCL translations, we employed the adverb "now" (*ekhon*) to represent the Greek particle in translating the phrase "set them apart now."²⁹

How does this observation affect our understanding of the role of translation, the evaluation of translations, and the practical use of various Bible translations?

- It should make us aware of the fact that no translation of the Bible perfectly conveys every detail of the original languages in every passage.
- When we are seeking to evaluate different Bible versions, we ought to remind ourselves that one verse's treatment in a version does not necessarily characterize the overall translation philosophy and accuracy of that version.
- It should cause us to use a variety of versions in order to compare the translations so that we might be made aware of details that are sometimes missed in one translation as opposed to another.

²³ J. P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 811 (§91.6).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1934), 1149. Cf., also, Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 673.

²⁶ Robertson, *Grammar*, 1149.

²⁷ "It ought to be preserved in the translation"—Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1930), 3:178.

²⁸ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, compilers, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones with Roderick McKenzie, et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978 reprint), ??.

²⁹ *Pobitro Baibel: Common Language Version* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangladesh Bible Society, 1998) and *Kitabul Mokaddos* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangladesh Bible Society, 2000).

- Differences between versions should send us to good commentaries based upon the original languages of Scripture so that we might find out which translation is closest to the original text.

Unfortunately, there will be some texts like Acts 13:2 which virtually all available English translations have translated poorly.³⁰ However, the reader may rest assured that such situations are rare occurrences. Also, such texts and their less than accurate translation seldom have any effect whatsoever upon the major doctrinal teachings of the Bible as a whole. Having no major doctrinal implication, however, does not eliminate significance. No Bible translator should have the freedom to select certain elements of biblical propositions for preservation and to excise the remainder from the text. An accurate translation must also be full and complete, not selective and partial. The omission of any portion of the text hinders full understanding or, at its worse, creates misunderstanding.

Take as an example, a repetitive text like Numbers 7:12-83, describing each tribe's offerings at the dedication of the Tabernacle presented on each of twelve consecutive days, one tribe per day. In an early draft of our SBCL translation, some of the translation team had decided to employ an abridgement of the text like that of GNB³¹ instead of providing the full wording of the text. First, there are minor variations in the Hebrew wording—all the verses are not exact repetitions. Second, the wordiness is unusual for this kind of text—it has a purpose. “The repetition of the description of the offerings . . . may serve to denote the special regard which God has to the offerings of His people.”³² Ronald Allen asks, “Is it not possible that in this daily listing we catch a glimpse of the magnificent pomp and ceremony attending these gifts?”³³ He goes on to state, “This chapter has a stately charm, a leisurely pace, and a studied sense of magnificence as each tribe in its turn was able to make gifts to God that he received with pleasure.”³⁴ Dennis Olson in the less than evangelical *Harper's Bible Commentary* writes, “The careful repetition underscores the unanimous and strong support for the tabernacle and its priesthood. Every tribe has an equal and strong commitment to the worship of God.”³⁵ GNB's treatment of the text would be the equivalent of asking a class of graduating seminarians to stand en masse as the dean intones, “Ladies and gentlemen, the graduating class of 2004 is hereby awarded 50 Master of Divinity degrees and 5 Master of Theology degrees”—without reading each person's name, without having them walk across the platform, without hooding them, and without placing the diploma in their hands. It makes

³⁰ The matter of this particle should not be taken as a claim that all particles should be translated. As Carson points out, “precisely because particles are subtle things, one can always find instances where any particular translation has it wrong”—D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation—and Other Limits, Too,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World*, ed. by Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 73.

³¹ *Good News Bible: The Bible in Today's English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1976).

³² Charles John Ellicott, *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, 5 vols. (London: Cassell & Co., 1897), 1:503. Cf., also, Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-varsity Press, 1981), 93.

³³ Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan, 1990), 2:762.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Dennis T. Olson, “Numbers,” in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. by James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 187-88.

for a brief and perhaps comfortable ceremony, but is empty of celebration and individual recognition.³⁶ Needless to say, both SBCL and MBCL preserve the entire text of Numbers 7:12-83 without abridgement—and, the class of 2004 will receive their due individual recognition at graduation.

Ezra and the Books of Moses

As the Israelites returned to Israel under the patronage of Cyrus, king of Persia, they encountered great difficulties. They faced external opposition from the Samaritans (Ezra 4–5; Neh 4, 6). Their internal problems involved the treatment of the poor (Neh 5) and the divisiveness of intermarriage with the Gentiles (Ezra 9–10). The latter problem had created a multilingual situation in Israelite homes (Neh 13:23-24). That only intensified the language problem the exiles had brought with them from their captivity in Babylon. Most of them no longer spoke Hebrew.

In spite of all their problems, the people of Israel still hungered for the Word of God. It was their desire to gather at the Water Gate in Jerusalem and to ask Ezra to read the Law of Moses to them (Neh 8:1). The first day of the seventh month was the beginning of the civil New Year and the observance of the Feast of Trumpets (Lev 23:23-25; Num 29:1-6). Some preparations had been made for the occasion. Craftsmen had constructed a platform of wood so that everyone could see and hear Ezra (Neh 8:4). The timing and the arrangements were purposeful, but the eager attentiveness of the people was spontaneous (v. 3).

Ezra was the first to discern what the people of Israel really needed. They needed spiritual revival. The revival, however, would have to be based upon their obedience to the Scriptures. He realized, too, that obedience is predicated upon understanding. If an instruction is not understood, it cannot be obeyed. The more complete the understanding, the more complete the obedience will be. With this in mind, Ezra appointed men to help him in the task of proclamation, translation, and interpretation (vv. 4, 7-8).

A threefold process took place that day. First, the text of the Law of Moses was read aloud in the ancient Hebrew language in which it had been written: “they read in the book in the law of God” (v. 8). The second step involved translating the text into the vernacular best understood by most of the returnees after seventy years of Babylonian captivity. The dominant language in daily use was Aramaic, the language of Babylon. Modern Hebrew script reveals just how much captivity in Babylon had affected the people of Israel linguistically. They borrowed the so-called “Hebrew” script entirely from Aramaic.³⁷ That borrowing can be dated to the time of Ezra. Two different phrases in Nehemiah 8:8 may be interpreted as a reference to translation: either “distinctly” (cf. NIV’s “making it clear” or NASB’s “translating”) or “gave the sense.” In either case, the best interpretation of the verse as a whole includes the fact that Ezra and his fellow teachers translated the reading of the Hebrew text into the more commonly understood Aramaic.

³⁶ Allen suggested this analogy (“Numbers,” 2:762-63).

³⁷ Martha L. Carter and Keith N. Schoville, eds., *Sign, Symbol, Script: An Exhibition on the Origins of Writing and the Alphabet* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, 1984), 42. See, also, F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments: Some Chapters on the Transmission of the Bible*, 3rd rev. ed. (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1963), 52-53.

The third step was causing the people “to understand.” The words *understanding*, *understand*, and *understood* occur repeatedly in Nehemiah 8 (vv. 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, and 13). It is significant that the record of the events of that New Year’s day emphasized understanding. The purpose of translating and interpreting was that the people might understand (v. 8). The people rejoiced because they understood (v. 12). They even assembled again for that same purpose (“to understand,” v. 13). Hearing the Scriptures in their heart language, the people understood it so well that it produced a degree of obedience not seen in nearly one thousand years. They set about to observe the Feast of Booths in complete compliance with what they understood from the Law of Moses. Not since the time of Joshua had there been such a complete and accurate observance of the Feast of Booths (v. 17). Out of such obedience even greater joy emerged (v. 18). One of the Scripture’s most beautiful prayers (Neh 9) resulted from that experience.

For such a spiritual experience to occur in the present, the ministers of God’s Word must give equal attention to the production of an understandable translation of the Bible. Anything less results in spiritual mediocrity that might be perpetuated for more than a thousand years.

Jesus and the Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-23 offers many enticing tidbits for the interested reader’s study. Two very significant statements occur in verses 19 and 23. Just like Nehemiah 8, the key concept repeated in Matthew 13 is *understanding* (vv. 13, 14, 15, 19, and 23). In His interpretation of the parable of the sower (vv. 19-23), Jesus made it clear that understanding is the goal of the Word’s dissemination. If the Word is not understood, Satan (“the wicked one”) will be victorious (v. 19). On the other hand, if the recipient understands the Word, it will result in fruitfulness and God will have the victory (v. 23).

Believers normally desire two spiritual products in their lives: joy and fruitfulness. Both of these are produced by obedience to Scripture. The more completely the believer understands Scripture, the more fully obedient he or she will be. Bible translations which are not understood cannot produce the highest degree of obedience, joy, or fruit. Translations difficult to understand tend to be unproductive, unfruitful. If a Bible translation is misunderstood, it will produce confusion, satanic interference, and spiritual starvation.

It is true that the proper understanding of Scripture does not rest with the translation alone. Translation does not eliminate the need for exposition and teaching. Too much clarity can remove a translation from both the realm of accuracy and the potential for becoming a classic. As Sijbolt Noorda explains, “ancient texts, and especially ancient religious texts, are not conspicuous by their clarity. We’d better be prepared in their case for some opacity, some obscurity. . . . we should practice restraint, avoiding excessive explanation and explication.”³⁸ Steiner simply states: “Bad translations communicate too much.”³⁹ It is tempting for the translator to interpret. One of Ryken’s complaints about dynamic equivalence translations is this very problem. In his words, “A translation that

³⁸ Sijbolt Noorda, “New and Familiar: The Dynamics of Bible Translation,” in *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion*, ed. by Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 353, The Bible in the 21st Century 1 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 14-15.

³⁹ Steiner, *After Babel*, 66.

substitutes an interpretation for what the original actually says ... removes the foundation on which to build a trustworthy interpretation of a text.”⁴⁰

Retaining this thought concerning interpretation, we will next consider the interaction of translation and exposition as exhibited in the New Testament itself.

Philip, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and Isaiah

Philip’s question to the Ethiopian eunuch was, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30, NIV). The high official from the court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia was a proselyte to the Jewish faith. According to the text of Isaiah 53 cited in Acts 8:32-33, he was reading the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. Greek was not his heart language. In addition to this problem, the Septuagint’s translation of Isaiah 53 was (and still is) “gravely deviant.”⁴¹ In spite of these handicaps, enough of the truth came through with Philip’s helpful guidance that the eunuch came by faith to Christ as his personal Savior.

Until he possessed a clear understanding of the Bible’s message, the Ethiopian official could not come to Christ. The absence of a translation in his own language impaired the Ethiopian. Even though he had some proficiency in Greek, the poor quality of the translation he had obtained was a hindrance to him. The Holy Spirit intervened to compensate for that deviant translation. He sent Philip to provide a more accurate translation and explanation.

From this brief account in Acts 8 we can learn several facts about Bible translations:

- God can use a second language or even deviant translation to bring people to Christ. The Word in Greek brought the Ethiopian to a certain degree of conviction even though that translation was flawed, at best.
- A translation can be so poor that by itself it cannot be the instrument of the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration. The Greek translation of Isaiah 53 was too flawed to bring the Ethiopian to a complete saving knowledge of Christ.
- The key factor in the efficacy of a Bible translation is understandability. Only when Philip helped the Ethiopian understand what Isaiah was saying did he believe in Christ and experience regeneration.

It is imperative that we realize that the understanding about which we are speaking commences on the linguistic level then moves to the spiritual. Believers as well as unbelievers will always find portions of the Scriptures difficult to fathom spiritually even if the language itself is perfectly understandable.⁴² According to Peter, the epistles of the apostle Paul contained “some things hard to understand” (2 Pet 3:16, NAU). Peter did not mean that Paul’s vocabulary and grammar were too sophisticated, odd, foreign, or

⁴⁰ Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 219.

⁴¹ Gleason L. Archer and G. C. Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1983), 123.

⁴² Understanding is never instantaneous nor is it “perfect or total. It can and does improve with time, and becomes sufficient for all practical purposes; and one can understand parts of M [the message] very well. But there is always room for growth and correction in our understandings. And yet through this humanly imperfect process, the marvel is that God speaks to us with power and clarity from the Scriptures, so that one can learn to know him, and to discern and do his will.”—Charles R. Taber, “Hermeneutics and Culture—An Anthropological Perspective,” in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. by John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 87.

outdated. The spiritual concepts were the heart of the problem. In our current study we are emphasizing the nuts and bolts of communication (and thus, of translation): language itself.

Some, like the Ethiopian of old, have read portions of the Bible in their second or even third language. There is no substitute, however, for reading God's Word in one's first language. Consider the testimony of a present-day "Ethiopian":

Skip Firchow and David Akoitai (ah-KOY-tie) sat at the plywood desk translating Mark's Gospel into the Rotokas language. A cool breeze drifted through the open window, heralding the rain that fell every afternoon on this Papua New Guinean (PNG) island of Bougainville.

Akoitai re-read the verse they'd just translated. He thought for a moment and then said to Skip, "When I read God's Word in my own language, it's much easier for me to understand than when I read it in English.

"Trying to read the English Bible is like trying to drink out of a cup with a lid on it. I know there's water inside, but I can't get at it. When I read the Bible in Tok Pisin [PNG's main trade language], I understand it a little. It's like I can pry the lid partway off. I can sip some of the water.

"But when I read the Bible in my own language, it's like drinking deeply from a full cup with no lid! My thirst is quenched. I understand completely."⁴³

After nearly two thousand years of church history, one would think that at least the major languages of the world would possess understandable translations of the Bible. Even major languages, however, may have Bibles whose language the common person finds difficult to understand.

Common Language in Bangladesh

Bengali, the language of India's West Bengal and of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), is one of those languages. Bengali-speaking peoples currently comprise the world's seventh largest language group.⁴⁴ In 1966 the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE) established a team of missionary and national translators to produce a new Bengali Bible in Bangladesh. Principles and practices learned in that translation project form a large part of my experience in Bible translation.

The Bible translation project in Bangladesh employed the common language of Bengali-speaking peoples. Known as the Standard Bengali Common Language (SBCL) translation of the Bible, it adhered to the principle that **common language has priority over dialectal, literary, or technical language; therefore, words and constructions understood by everyone take precedence over those known only to the highly educated or to those from but one region of the country.**

⁴³ Kim Beatty, "Take Off the Lid!" *In Other Words* 17/5 (July/August 1991): 5.

⁴⁴ See, <http://www.soyouwanna.com/site/toptens/languages/languagesFULL.html>. The exact placement of Bengali is debatable due to the varied ways in which the statistics are counted and the dates of the surveys. Cf. http://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/Fall_2001/ling001/world_languages.html.

To aid the Bible translation team in its pursuit of the common Bengali language, the translators established the following guidelines for vocabulary and forms to be employed in the SBCL Bible:

- *The language (especially vocabulary, as compared to grammar) of people in the 25-35 age group is to have priority over people older than 35 and younger than 25. This age group uses that which is today's accepted Bengali.*

Over half of the population of Bangladesh is under the age of 25. This age group dominates the spoken language. The language of youth also plays a huge role in common American English even though American youth are a much smaller segment of their country's population than the youth of Bangladesh. Around the globe television commercials employ youthful bodies, youthful activities, and youthful vocabulary to sell everything from automobiles to zippers. Media molds the language of a people. Today's youth-speak affects the language of tomorrow.

Senior citizens in the United States may refer to a "stereo as a *hi-fi, record player, phonograph, or Victrola*. Similarly, the word *icebox* is still used by some people to refer to what younger generations call a *refrigerator*"⁴⁵ or, just *fridge*. There are many differences in language usage between the generations. Languages continue to develop through the dynamic of age difference. No language remains the same. All languages change. Historical and social developments determine the rate of change. Consider the simple fact that "meat offering" (e.g., Lev 2:4, KJV) does not involve meat at all (cf. "meal offering," Exod 40:29, NASB). No one made a typographical error, switching a *t* for an *l*. In early English "meat" was a word often used of any food. It was often used of the grain fed to horses or cows.⁴⁶ Obviously, serious Bible translators would not retain "meat offering" in English translations today. It would only cause confusion.

William Tyndale (1494-1536) published his translation of the Bible into English in 1525. Wycliffe's prior translation needed replacing since "in the course of two centuries the English language had undergone such great changes that his translation was no longer understood."⁴⁷ Three hundred and ninety-three years of change in the English language (1611-2004) has altered dramatically the meanings of biblical words and phrases like "gay clothing" (Jas 2:3, KJV). Bible translations need continual revision in order to keep up with the changes in a language. Indeed, "Bible translation is special in the sense that it is somehow a never-ending story."⁴⁸ Having said that, it must be stated, however, that the differences between Wycliffe's translation and Tyndale's translation run far deeper than those produced by a developing language. As Daniell observes,

Tyndale's Genesis was something strikingly new. He was translating not the Latin, but the Hebrew. And he was writing recognisable English. Simply registering the changes in the English language from Chaucer's day to Tyndale's in no way explains the difference between

⁴⁵ Edward Finegan and Niko Besnier, *Language: Its Structure and Use* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1989), 416.

⁴⁶ "Meat," in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1971, reprinted 1985), 1:1755.

⁴⁷ B. K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 222.

⁴⁸ Noorda, "New and Familiar," 8.

‘Be made light; and made is light’ and ‘let there be light and there was light’.⁴⁹

Today we would do well to follow Tyndale’s insistence upon translating directly from the original biblical languages rather than from an extant translation (no matter how entrenched an authorized translation like the Vulgate or Old Bengali Bible or KJV has become). When a translation is based upon a translation (e.g., the NIV or GNB), “it is in a double sense prone to the danger of inevitable distortions of the original text’s meaning, or more positively, runs the risk of being twice removed from the source text’s particular significance.”⁵⁰ This advice should also be followed when revising a translation. For example, although the NAU made nearly 20,000 changes in the NASB,⁵¹ it still failed to correct a long-standing error in Psalm 14:4 where both NASB and NAU have retained “Lord” for יהוה instead of “LORD.”

It was characteristic of Tyndale that he determined “to put nothing in the way of being understood.”⁵² As a result, his translation sounds more up-to-date today than the KJV, which was translated nearly 100 years after Tyndale’s.⁵³ Common language translations possess a certain timeless quality. Ronald Knox, perhaps the greatest Roman Catholic Bible translator after Jerome himself, put it this way:

The moral, surely, is that anybody who tries to do a new translation of the Bible in these days should aim at producing something which will not, in fifty or a hundred years’ time, be ‘dated’. In a word, what you want is neither sixteenth-century English nor twentieth-century English, but timeless English. Whether you can get it, is another question.⁵⁴

Lasting understandability is not attained easily. On the one hand, the translator must avoid what Workman called “‘stencil translation,’ emphasizing the mechanical nature of the process.”⁵⁵ An extreme example would be in the following retention of Hebrew word order (in order to reproduce a chiasm) in Psalm 19:1 that is grammatically confusing in English:

The heavens are declaring the glory of God,
And the work of His hands is making known the firmament.

Yet another, more frequent, example of “stencil translation” occurs when the church demands that translators in languages outside English employ a single term for theologically technical and exclusive terms like “propitiation,” “reconciliation,” “redemption,” and “sanctification.” Such terms or their technical equivalents may not exist in another language. This is not true of theological terms alone. What about the variety of plants and animals in the Bible? Some languages are extremely restricted in

⁴⁹ Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 284.

⁵⁰ Jeremy Punt, “Translating the Bible in South Africa: Challenges to Responsibility and Contextuality,” in *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion*, ed. by Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 353, The Bible in the 21st Century 1 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 119.

⁵¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 150-51.

⁵² Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 113.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁴ Ronald Knox, *The Trials of a Translator* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1949), 18-19.

⁵⁵ Samuel K. Workman, *Fifteenth Century Translation as an Influence on English Prose*, Princeton Studies in English 18 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1940), 9.

certain realms of vocabulary. Steiner reports that “The gauchos of the Argentine know some 200 expressions for the colours of horses’ hides, and such discrimination is obviously vital to their economy. But their normal speech finds room for only four plant names.”⁵⁶ One of the aspects of translation that makes the task so difficult is that translation, according to Adele Berlin, “is an abbreviated form of exegesis: exegesis that does not have the space to explain or justify itself.”⁵⁷

On the other hand, we can become so casual in translating the Bible that we end up obfuscating rather than clarifying. Daniell cites the example of Tyndale’s translation of John 14:1 (“Let not your hearts be troubled”). Tyndale may have chosen heart rather than mind because he felt that “a troubled heart is ... a more sorrowful thing than having a troubled mind.”⁵⁸ In their attempt to be more understandable, GNB utilized “Do not be worried and upset”—“as if the disciples were being told by Jesus to cheer up after having missed a bus.”⁵⁹ It is possible to go too far with common language translation.

This kind of excess prompted Ryken to write *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation*.⁶⁰ However, when he writes that “One cannot formulate a theology without theological vocabulary”⁶¹ (words like “propitiation,” “justification,” and “redemption”), his argument is focused on the English language and English Bibles. Many languages lack a theological vocabulary of the breadth and depth found in English. Some might suggest the creation of new words to enrich the receptor language. However, great care must be taken in inventing new words for a language. One of the reasons William Carey’s Bengali Bible translation did not survive was his penchant for creating new terms from ancient Pali or Sanskrit which never caught on. After his death in 1834, William Yates produced a totally new Bengali translation by 1844. The Bible Societies of India and Bangladesh produced over fifteen revisions of Yates’ translation to keep up with developments in modern Bengali. Even with the many revisions, sections of the translation contain words no longer found in any of the current Bengali dictionaries.⁶²

God Created Male and Female

Due to this factor of rapid language change and the failure of invented vocabulary to survive, a common language translation appeared to be the best route to take in Bangladesh. How should that common language be circumscribed? How could the target audience be limited in a fashion that would guarantee that nearly all of the Bengali-speaking people of Bangladesh would understand the translation? After much research and reflection, the following guideline was established:

⁵⁶ Steiner, *After Babel*, 90.

⁵⁷ Adele Berlin, “On Bible Translations and Commentaries,” in *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion*, ed. by Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 353, The Bible in the 21st Century 1 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 181.

⁵⁸ Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 137.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 79-102 (“Seven Fallacies About Translation”) and 103-19 (“Eight Fallacies About Bible Readers”).

⁶¹ Ibid., 125.

⁶² George Steiner points out that “A true reader is a dictionary addict” (*After Babel*, 25). This is even more applicable for a translator.

- *Bangladesh is a society publicly dominated by men. The men, therefore, are far more educated and socially aware than the women. A translation utilizing a male-dominated vocabulary would be over the heads of the women. Therefore, language used by the women of Bangladesh has priority over the language used by the men.*

So-called gender-neutral language was not involved in this translation guideline. There was no need to avoid gender-specific vocabulary or grammar. A number of difficulties, however, did present themselves to the translation team. For example, in Bangladesh the spoken language of women may change from village to village or even from one neighborhood of a city to another neighborhood of the same city. This characteristic has been observed in other regions of the world as well. Ann Cornelisen, archaeologist turned anthropologist, discovered the identical linguistic situation in southern Italy. She writes,

Diphthongs tripped over diphthongs in what sounded like the spewings of an irate woman with a head cold. My first, full-dress encounter with the lingua franca of the peasants left me stunned. Dialects change from district to district and from town to town, and also, as I found out, in Torregreca from neighborhood to neighborhood.⁶³

In societies where women are limited in their movements outside their own homes and families, they develop their own speechways. Social interaction may be limited to a group of women living in close proximity to one another. The linguistic isolation may be re-enforced by taboos about women initiating or carrying on conversation with men. Furthermore, pervasive poverty might limit the number of televisions and radios to a few tea shops and upper class homes where only the men gather in the evenings. Choosing women's language is not equivalent to selecting the least sophisticated forms of speech or literature, however. According to Steiner,

In a few instances, and this is an extraordinarily suggestive point, the speech of women is somewhat more archaic than that of men. ...
... The semantic contour, the total expressive means used by men and women differ. The view they take of the output and consumption of words is not the same. As it passes through verb tenses, time is bent into distinctive shapes and fictions. At a rough guess, women's speech is richer than men's in those shadings of desire and futurity known in Greek and Sanskrit as optative; women seem to verbalize a wider range of qualified resolve and masked promise. Feminine uses of the subjunctive in European languages give to material facts and relations a characteristic *vibrato*. I do not say they lie about the obtuse, resistant fabric of the world: they multiply the facets of reality, they strengthen the adjective to allow it an alternative nominal status, in a way which men often find unnerving.⁶⁴

As the student of Scripture will recognize, the language of women can prove to be an advantage in translating the Bible.

Women's language must be given priority over that of men only when it is equally understood by both men and women. If a translator were to opt for a woman's term or

⁶³ Ann Cornelisen, "The widow Fascide," in *Other Fields, Other Grasshoppers: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. L. L. Langness (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1977), 179.

⁶⁴ Steiner, *After Babel*, 41-42.

phrase that is in a restricted use unknown to men, the common language factor would be violated and a dialectal translation would result. Another guideline was required:

- *The language utilized in the translation must be understood by non-Christians as well as Christians if it is to be used in evangelism.*

Bible translations are not solely a provision for believers. If Christians are going to be obedient to the Scriptures, they must be involved in spreading the message about Christ. That message is best carried in the Scriptures themselves. “Faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17, NASB). Translating the Bible into the common language, therefore, is a necessary part of evangelization. Since evangelization is a major goal in the utilization of the Word of God, translators must give proper attention to what language the unsaved understand. In Bangladesh, where less than 250,000 of the 127 million people are “Christian,” the need is for a translation that will aid in the evangelization of the nation.

Conclusion

By now you are wondering, “What ever happened to Amos 4:2-3?” We’ve determined the necessity of employing an understandable translation of Scripture that is at the same time accurate, faithful, orthodox, full of exegetical potential, clear, natural, readable, reliable, literary, beautiful, oral, rhythmic, and dignified. Are these standards attainable in a common language translation? Yes, they are. The labor is intense and exhausting, but the results effectively communicate what the prophet said and what the people of his own day most likely understood. In the Bengali it reads,

The Lord Yahweh⁶⁵ swore by His own holiness, “That time will certainly come when attached to rings you will be pulled away; you will all be pulled away by fish-hooks. Every one of you will be taken out straight ahead through a place where the wall is broken, and you will be cast out toward Harmon. I, Yahweh,⁶⁶ say this.”

Compare our translation with that of GNB:

As the Sovereign LORD is holy, he has promised, “The days will come when they will drag you away with hooks; every one of you will be like a fish on a hook. You will be dragged to the nearest break in the wall and thrown out.”

And, with NIV:

The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness:

“The time will surely come
when you will be taken away with hooks,
the last of you with fishhooks.
You will each go straight out
through breaks in the wall,
and you will be cast out toward Harmon,”
declares the LORD.

In the SBCL and MBCL the names for deity are more consistent with the Hebrew text. We chose “ring” instead of “hooks” because the meaning of the word is admittedly

⁶⁵ In the SBCL the divine titles are *Probhu Shodaprobhu* while in the MBCL they are *Allah Malik* (with “Lord” following “Allah” according to the Islamic dialectal usage).

⁶⁶ SBCL: *Shodaprobhu*; MBCL: *Mabud*.

unknown⁶⁷ and because the Assyrian practice of puncturing an enemy's nose or lip and attaching a ring or hook with a rope to assure compliance is well established. An Assyrian relief from Esarhaddon palace depicts this practice very clearly (cf. 2 Kgs 19:28).⁶⁸ The switch to the feminine in verse 3 (Heb. 4, lit., "you [fpl] will be brought out each [*woman*] before her and you [fpl] will be cast out") is, by context, clearly referring to the women addressed in verse 1 (Heb. 2). They are the antecedent to the pronouns in verses 2-3 (Heb. 3-4), so KJV's addition in italics ("*cow at that which is*") is unnecessary and distracting. Overall, the Bengali translations are closest to NIV, but more literal with regard to the divine names. The translational choices have very strong textual, grammatical, lexical, and exegetical support and the Bengali language is common, but literary. Above all, it is both faithful to the text and understandable—even if the references to "rings" and "fishhooks" and to "Harmon" are in need of interpretation by the exegete and expositor.

I close with a quote from Steiner and a comment: "To speak seriously of translation one must first consider the possible meanings of Babel, their inherence in language and mind."⁶⁹ Languages are different and they do divide mankind. God did not fail at Babel, therefore the task of the translator is necessary and difficult. Because of Babel, translators will disagree over issues in the same language. Only God can turn Babel on its head and reverse the linguistic divisions. By His wisdom and grace the believing translator can produce a faithful translation in a people's common language that God's Spirit will employ in giving true spiritual understanding.

⁶⁷ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. by Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson, CD-ROM Edition (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1994-2000), ¶ 3.

⁶⁸ Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 355 fig. 17.12 (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Vorderasiatisches Museum).

⁶⁹ Steiner, *After Babel*, 54.