# Bible Translations as Great Literature: Problems and Perspectives

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## Introduction

Some Bible translations have risen to the status of great literature. Among them are the Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and the King James Version. Though lacking in Greek linguistic sophistication, the Septuagint became great literature because of its unique role in Jewish and Early Church history. Jerome's Latin Vulgate impacted many Bible translations during the Reformation and the two centuries immediately following. As far as English Bibles are concerned, the KJV (1611, revised 1769) still maintains its exalted position in English literature's hall of fame. Luther's German translation (1545), the Spanish version of Reina-Valera (1569/1602), and the French Bible of Louis Segond (1910) might even lay claim to being great literature. In *The Word of God in English*[1] Leland Ryken identifies some of the factors that make an English Bible translation great literature. How would these same criteria apply to non-English translations? Is it incumbent upon Bible translators to produce literary masterpieces? If not, why? If so, by what means? How might this consideration affect Bible translations in languages where there is no pre-existing literature? How should the hallmarks of great literature impact future English translations? In an age of audio-visual media, how significant is the literary factor for Bible translations? This paper is but the beginning of an attempt to answer some of these questions.

## Criteria for Literary Excellence

Literary excellence can be defined by how successfully an author is able to communicate with his readers by means of literary conventions to which both he and his readers agree.[2] According to Ryken, "There is no more basic literary principle than that meaning is communicated through form."[3] Everything from words through genre is included in the concept of form. Literary effect is the result of the form. Ryken explains that

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[1] Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002).

[2] Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), xv.

[3] Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 31.

> The literary critic's preoccupation with the *how* of biblical writing is not frivolous. It is evidence of an artistic delight in verbal beauty and craftsmanship, but it is also part of an attempt to understand *what* the Bible says. In a literary text it is impossible to separate what is said from how it is said, content from form.[4]

Readers experiencing excellent literature are impacted by the affective power of the text, sensing its beauty, dignity, and mystery in such a fashion as to make the text memorable.[5] Memorability is aided by various elements of style. For example, Tyndale managed to induce memorability in Luke 2:16 by building "around the 'a' sound of 'Mary' in the middle of the sentence more 'a's on either side – 'and *they came with haste* and found . . . *the babe laid in a manger*'."[6]

## Clarity

Literary excellence in a Bible translation involves vocabulary and syntax that are clear and convey correct connotations.[7] Clarity is not something that happens just because a translation is made available in the reader's receptor language. It is the directness and plainness of a text that communicates. David Daniell, biographer par excellence of William Tyndale,[8] speaks of it as "A 'plain style', particularly a Christian plain style," that "feels very easy: that is part of its craft. It seems to avoid all 'colours' of rhetoric. . . . Downright call-a-spade-a-spade directness feels more open and honest, even more moral."[9] Speaking syntactically, clarity and plain style involve "finite verbs, few participles, subject-verb-object order, few dependent clauses, parataxis (a simple train of complete sentences joined by 'and'), Saxon vocabulary, mostly monosyllables."[10]

At first blush, this kind of plain English style seems to run counter to Pauline Greek style with its multiplication of participles, inverted word orders, multiple dependent clauses, and general lack of simple parataxis in sentences that can run in excess of 200 words.[11] Although A. T. Robertson rightly declares that the "ground element in Paul's speech is the short sentence,"[12] the longer, more complex constructions do occur and must be handled with care in translation. There is a modern tendency to shorten sentences by breaking compound or complex sentences into shorter sentences. Daniel Wallace observes that even the 27th edition of Nestle-Aland inserts punctuation to shorten sentences.[13] With regard to this unwarranted shortening of sentences in the Greek NT, he concludes:

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[4] Leland Ryken, "The Bible as Literature, Part 1: 'Words of Delight': The Bible as Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147/585 (Jan 1990): 12.

[5] Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 269-85.

[6] David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2003), 252.

[7] Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 229-33.

[8] David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1994).

[9] Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 251.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Examples of such lengthy and complex sentences include Eph 1:3-14 and Col 1:9-20. Paul is not alone in having some lengthy sentences. A long sentence also occurs in 1 Pet 1:3-12.

[12] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1934), 433.

[13] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 340 fn 65.

> This outlook seems to have impacted English translations as well (especially the NIV). The sentences are getting shorter. On a larger scale, this impacts several other grammatical issues, such as the frequency of imperatival participles or whether clauses exist in a hierarchical relationship (i.e., one subordinate to the other) or are coordinate.[14]

First Peter 5:6-7[15] provides one example of the impact that undue shortening of sentences might have on the meaning of the text. If the translator treats verse 7 as an independent clause, the verse stands by itself, as in the NRSV: "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you."[16] On the other hand, if the participle (ἐπιρίψαντες, "casting") is dependent on verse 6, "the idea is that the path of humility is found in casting one's cares on God ("humble yourselves . . . [by] casting"). Putting a period between the two verses obscures this connection."[17] NET Bible is one of the clearest of those English translations recognizing the connection: "And God will exalt you in due time, if you humble yourselves under his mighty hand by casting all your cares on him because he cares for you."

Parataxis in classical Hebrew narrative is dominated and given continuity by the ubiquitous *waw* as a clausal conjunction.[18] *Waw* should not be translated simply as "and" in every occurrence, since it represents a very wide range of clausal relationships. While this clausal conjunction is almost singularly responsible for the sequencing in Hebrew narrative, it does not produce one long compound sentence, contrary to the impression given by translations insensitive to the variety of usages of *waw*. The problem, however, goes deeper than translation. Hebrew grammarians have restricted their description of classical Hebrew to the clausal level while neglecting text level observations. Text level studies of Hebrew grammar leads Eep Talstra to state that Hebrew narrative texts actually "exhibit less 'parataxis' than suggested by classical grammars, which argue too much only on the basis of clause level observations, i.e.: verbal tenses and conjunctions."[19]

**Vividness of Expression**

For literary excellence, a translation needs to demonstrate retention of concrete and visual vocabulary.[20] This criterion is related to the primacy of imagery in poetry.[21] Classical Hebrew poetry is filled with those word pictures that appeal to the reader's senses. According to Watson, imagery is "concrete and sense-related, not based on

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[14] Ibid., 340.

[15] [6] Ταπεινώθητε οὖν ὑπὸ τὴν κραταιὰν χεῖρα τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα ὑμᾶς ὑψώσῃ ἐν καιρῷ, [7] πᾶσαν τὴν μέριμναν ὑμῶν ἐπιρίψαντες ἐπ' αὐτόν, ὅτι αὐτῷ μέλει περὶ ὑμῶν.

[16] Also, NIV: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

[17] Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 340.

[18] Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 647 (§39.1a).

[19] Eep Talstra, "A Hierarchy of Clauses in Biblical Hebrew Narrative," in *Narrative Syntax and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. by Ellen van Wolde (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 2002), 105.

[20] Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 233-35.

[21] Ibid., 247-48.

abstract concepts."[22] Two additional characteristics also must be present: an element of surprise and something new. The latter needs to be brand new or relatively unknown. On the other hand, it can be old, if it at least reveals a new twist.[23]

Translators need to focus on imagery. Correct identification of a poet's imagery can affect a word's meaning in a passage. In Amos 4:2, for example, the popular view interprets the difficult terms בְּצִנּוֹת (*bᵉṣinnôṯ*) and בְּסִירוֹת (*bᵉsîrôṯ*) as references to hooks (NASB/NASU, ESV, KJV/NKJV, RSV/NRSV, NIV, NLT, HCSB). A few translations have gone with the concept of baskets used for catching and transporting fish (NJPS and NET). Shalom Paul offers a detailed analysis of all of the potential translations, concluding that "baskets" and "pots" involve the fewest difficulties. Indeed, the "image of the prophet is most likely to be understood in the light of the common practice of catching, packing, and transporting fish in such receptacles."[24] The weir baskets appear to be the most commonly used instrument for taking freshwater fish. As for fish hooks, they seem to have disappeared by 3000 B.C. in Mesopotamia and Egypt alike.[25] Therefore, Amos proclaims that "When hauled away into exile, the women of Samaria will be like fish packed and transported to market."[26]

Another element involved in vividness of expression is the repetition of key words. Because of the constraints of the receptor language or contexts that demand a different meaning, translations sometimes obscure a key word. Original audiences would note and appreciate the repetition, even if the effect was subtle. For example, Moses employs יָד ("hand") as a key word in Genesis 24. J. A. Naudé describes the workings of the text as follows: "The servant places his hand under Abraham's thigh (v. 9), Rebekah lowers her jug on her hand (v. 18), the servant places jewelry on her hand (v 22), and Laban later sees the jewelry on the hands of his sister (v 30)."[27] Verse 10 also uses יָד in a prepositional phrase (בְּיָדוֹ) meaning "with him" (cf. ESV's "taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master"; cp. NIV, NET, NJPS, NRSV). Normally it would be considered too literal to translate the phrase non-idiomatically. However, since the word is part of the literary motif, translators may choose to retain it as in NASB/NASU ("with a variety of good things of his master's in his hand"; cp. KJV/NKJV).

## Literary Ambiguity

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[22] Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, 2nd ed., Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 26 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 251.

[23] Ibid., 252.

[24] Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991), 134.

[25] Ibid., 132; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 769.

[26] *NET Bible: New English Translation*, 2nd Beta ed. (Dallas, Tex.: Biblical Studies Press, 1996-2003), 1595 fns. 21 and 23.

[27] J. A. Naudé, "An Overview of Recent Developments in Translation Studies with Special Reference to the Implications for Bible Translation," in *Contemporary Translation Studies and Bible Translation: A South African Perspective*, ed. by J. A. Naudé and C. H. J. van der Merwe, Acta Theologica 2002, Supplementum 2 (Bloemfontein, South Africa: Publication Office of the University of the Free State, 2002), 60.

Great literature contains the potential for multiple meaning, openness for application, and preservation of the element of mystery.[28] Ambiguity does not always involve a pun, double syntax (e.g., a genitive that could be either subjective or objective), or dubious general meaning. When Nahum writes "a sword will devour your young lions" (2:13 [Heb. 14]), the immediate meaning is obvious. God will slay Assyria's warriors. Nahum's comparison holds for a number of reasons: (1) Assyrian warriors were fierce hunters of their human prey; (2) lions are part of an extended metaphor employed in verses 11-12 (Heb. 12-13); (3) Assyrian kings depicted themselves in writings and in palace reliefs as great lion hunters; (4) the ultimate challenge and boast of Assyrian kings was that of slaying a lion with one's sword or dagger and now the Assyrians will perish by the sword; (5) Assyrian kings boasted of killing large numbers of lions and now the Lord will slay large numbers of their warriors; and, (6) resident in the text is the implication that the hunter will become the hunted.[29] All of these implications combine to give the phraseology and the picture vividness and force. The ambiguity is in not knowing which of these factors (or even some other factor unknown to the modern reader) we should keep most clearly in mind. Bible translation should retain this aura of ambiguity that engages the mind and keeps its attention, rather than limiting the force of the imagery to only one aspect of the allusion.

Clarity and plainness of style does not require the elimination of the mysterious or ambiguous. Daniell concludes that Tyndale's English clarity "revealed strangeness, and especially within the parables."[30] Simple language does not equate with a loss of mystery. On the other hand, retention of excessive ambiguity can be counter-productive. John Wilkins, a 17th-century vicar and scholar, put it this way: "Obscurity in the discourse is an argument of ignorance in the mind. . . . The more clearly we understand anything ourselves, the more easily can we expound it to others."[31] Unfortunately, one of the issues many people tend to bring with them to their reading of the Scriptures is that they have been predisposed to think of the Bible as a book that cannot be understood.[32] In Johannes Louw's opinion, "Many people actually insist that religious truth is so basically incomprehensible for the human mind that a translation of the Scriptures should be equally obscure and even mystifying."[33]

Can such incomprehensibility be supported theologically? Perspicuity appears to be the opposite of ambiguity. So, how might the issue of ambiguity affect the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture? Perhaps we first should clarify what perspicuity of Scripture does *not* mean:[34]

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[28] Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 235-40.

[29] For an extensive discussion of the reality and role of the lion motif in Assyrian annals and reliefs and Nahum's employment of that motif, see Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to the Neo-Assyrian Lion Motif," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158/631 (July 2001): 287-307.

[30] Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 251.

[31] John Wilkins, *Ecclesiastes or a Discourse concerning the Gift of Preaching, as it falls under the rules of Art* (1646), 72; as cited in Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 254.

[32] Johannes P. Louw, "Bible Translation and Receptor Response," in *Meaningful Translation: Its Implications for the Reader*, ed. by Johannes P. Louw, United Bible Societies Monograph Series 8 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 4.

[33] Ibid.

[34] The following points are summarized from Larry D. Pettegrew, "The Perspicuity of Scripture," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 15/2 (Fall 2004): 212-14.

1. Perspicuity does not mean that the precise meaning of Scripture is equally clear in all its text.
2. Perspicuity does not mean that Scripture's teaching is equally simple throughout.
3. Perspicuity does not mean that it is actually unnecessary to interpret, explain, or expound Scripture.
4. Perspicuity does not mean that the most essential doctrines are stated with equal clarity wherever they are touched upon in Scripture.

Now that we have clarified what is not meant by perspicuity of Scripture, what *does* it mean? Theologians and expositors have presented at least eight statements that help to define the doctrine of perspicuity:[35]

1. Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person to live according to its teachings.
2. Scripture is deep enough to challenge the highest intellectual ability of its readers.
3. In essential matters Scripture is unarguably clear.
4. The reader's own finitude and sinfulness is at fault for most obscurities in the Scripture.
5. For the interpretation of Scripture, readers must employ ordinary hermeneutics.
6. Scripture is plain enough for even the unbeliever to understand at least superficially.
7. The Holy Spirit is the spiritual organ of perception through whom the reader or hearer of Scripture might understand Scripture's significance.
8. Every believer has the right and the duty to interpret the Scripture for himself or herself rather than relying upon the Church for its meaning.

Therefore, we can readily conclude that the Scriptures are not inherently incomprehensible. The reader (especially the believing reader) can expect the Bible to be generally understandable. Understandability is a legitimate goal for the Bible translator.

**Effective Rhythm**

Literature that is great reads smoothly.[36] Finding the cadence of the original text and transmitting something similar in the receptor language is quite often very difficult. Rhythmic reading is related to sounds and word length as well as pauses and clausal relationships. In his discussion of specific examples of French poetry composed by Paul Verlaine and Victor Hugo, Donald Frame observes that "sounds are obviously paramount: mainly the *f*'s and soft *s*'s, as well as the *l*'s and *r*'s, all contributing even more than the meaning to the sense of soft breeze and perfumed hush."[37] Such sonant effects occur frequently in the Hebrew Bible. What translator is not charmed and challenged by the loving lilt of the first lines of the "Song of the Vineyard" in Isaiah 5:1?

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[35] As with the preceding points about what perspicuity is not, the following points defining what it is are summarized from Pettegrew, "The Perspicuity of Scripture," 214-16.

[36] Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 257-68.

[37] Donald Frame, "Pleasures and Problems of Translation," in *The Craft of Translation*, ed. by John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 72. The sample from Verlaine: *Les sanglots longs // Des violons // De l'automne // Blessent mon coeur // D'une langueur // Monotone*. The sample from Hugo: *Un frais parfum sortait des touffes d'asphodèle, // Les souffles de la nuit flottaient sur Galgala*.

אָשִׁירָה נָּא֙ לִֽידִידִ֔י שִׁירַ֖ת דּוֹדִ֑י לְכַרְמֹ֕ו
כֶּ֚רֶם הָיָ֣ה לִֽידִידִ֔י בְּקֶ֖רֶן בֶּן־שָֽׁמֶן׃

English versions sound more like travesties than translations, an irritating intrusion rather than a song of love. Verse 2a imitates the choppy rhythm of working the soil and pruning the vines:

וַיְעַזְּקֵ֥הוּ וַיְסַקְּלֵ֖הוּ וַיִּטָּעֵ֣הוּ שֹׂרֵ֑ק
וַיִּבֶן מִגְדָּל֙ בְּתוֹכֹ֔ו
וְגַם־יֶ֥קֶב חָצֵ֖ב בֹּ֑ו

The end of verse 2 depicts the disgusting outcome: בְּאֻשִׁים (*b$^{e}$'ušîm*, "stinking grapes"). Interestingly, בְּאֻשִׁים exhibits a combination of vowels and a sibilant that closely approximate the sounds of similar scatological terms of revulsion like שִׁקּוּצִים (*šiqqûṣîm*, "detestable things") and גִּלּוּלִים (*gillûlîm*, "idols" or "dung idols"[38]). How does a translator communicate all of these rhythmic elements of the original text in the receptor language?

Rhythm and cadence go beyond assonance and consonance to the free flow of speech without interruptions that detract from the force and coherence of the text. Recently I attempted to read Titus 3:5 publicly from a recognized, literal, English translation. It reads,

> He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, … (NASU, 1995)

The phrasing caused me to stumble and the cadence felt awkward. The pause after "He saved us" (note the comma in the text) was a big part of the awkwardness. Since I was converted at the age of 16, it would not be accurate to say that I was brought up on the KJV, but it was the translation with which I was most familiar for five or six years. In my last years in Bible college and early years in seminary, my Bible was most often the ASV (1901) or, later, the NASB. The NASB is identical in wording to the NASU at Titus 3:5. The ASV reads,

> not by works *done* in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, …

It is much closer to the KJV, which reads as follows:

> Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; …

Note that the ASV, though smoother reading than NASU/NASB, produces a bit of roughness with the addition of "*done*" and the commas setting off the relative clause following "righteousness." KJV's smooth cadence carries the reader unhindered, unslowed, to the focal point of the text: the contrast ("but"). After all, the contrast is the point of the verse. In the Greek it is immediately evident that the contrast is the focal point:

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[38] H. D. Preuss, "*gillûlîm*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. by John T. Willis and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 3:2.

> οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων τῶν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ ἃ ἐποιήσαμεν ἡμεῖς ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ αὐτοῦ ἔλεος ἔσωσεν ἡμᾶς διὰ λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας καὶ ἀνακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου, …[39]

The KJV basically followed the word order of the Greek with one exception for the sake of brevity and smoothness: in the Greek, the emphatic subject "we" (ἡμεῖς) follows its verb (ἐποιήσαμεν). In English, however, it is hard put to reproduce its force and wording literally. In that regard, the ASV is more accurate, since it reproduces the Greek phraseology exactly by its rendering "we did ourselves." The ESV, attempting to be more accurate, negated the effect by restructuring the verb as a noun and the pronoun's case from nominative to instrumental: "not because of works done by us." One can understand the desire of ASV to be more accurate and to try to retain the fluidity of the KJV, but ESV's motivations and aims are more complex and puzzling.

Among the dynamic translations, the GNB (TEV) has

> … he saved us. It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy that he saved us, through the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and new life by washing us …

Its placement of "he saved us" with the preceding verse and sentence effectively divorces those words from the following sentence except by implication. "We ourselves," however, is a more accurate rendering of the emphatic personal pronoun than some more formal versions. In spite of the altered verse division, the wording also preserves the focal point at the contrast. "New birth" and "new life" are a fine literary pairing representing "regeneration" and "renewal." The pairing is not as propitious as the Vulgate's *regenerationis et renovationis* or Reina-Valera's (1960) *de la regeneración y por la renovación*, which has the corresponding vocabulary. English could have employed the same vocabulary ("regeneration and renovation"), except that "renovation" does not have the spiritual sensitive connotations of "renewal." In this day and age, it would sound as though salvation is just a remodeling job.

Is there a more excellent literary translation than the KJV for this particular verse? Perhaps not.[40] Happily, the word order of the Greek is perfectly acceptable in the English translation of this passage. Indeed, the word order produces a pleasant cadence and allows the focus on the contrast to be as evident as it is in the Greek. In the Standard Bengali Common Language (SBCL) translation, we have a mixed result in Titus 3:5.

> কোন সৎ কাজের জন্য তিনি আমাদের উদ্‌ধার করেন নি, তাঁর করুণার জন্যই তা করলেন। পবিত্র আত্মার দ্বারা নতুন জন্ম দান করে ও নতুন ভাবে সৃষ্টি করে তিনি আমাদের অন্তর ধূয়ে পরিষ্কার করলেন, আর এইভাবেই তিনি আমাদের উদ্‌ধার করলেন।

The first portion up to the first sentence break (।) reads with literary cadence and effectiveness. However, the next portion through to the end tends to be too expansive and repetitious in nature,[41] so that it loses its smoothness. It is clear, understandable prose, but not elegant literature. The contrast that is expressed very specifically in the Greek is

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[39] Kurt Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1968), 742.

[40] Consider the following translation: "It is not by righteous deeds that we performed, but according to His mercy He saved us through the Holy Spirit's washing of regenerating and renewing."

[41] The final clause in the verse (আর এইভাবেই তিনি আমাদের উদ্‌ধার করলেন) is an expansion not found in the Greek.

only implied in the Bengali by means of an emphatic suffix (on জন্যই)—a contrasting conjunction (like কিন্তু) is not employed.

Could the Bengali translation of Titus 3:5 be more literary and more in keeping with a formal equivalence? Of course it could. The real question is: Would a more literary and formal rendering communicate the text more accurately and clearly? Given that the target audience is young, unfinished academically, unevangelized, and barely literate, the current SBCL translation leaves fewer unanswered questions for the reader than a more sophisticated literary translation might. Who will answer their questions? Until a more highly trained clergy is available, the literary ambiguity of a more formal translation could be detrimental. The SBCL is the equivalent of the Wyclif translations in English in the 1380s. Just as the Wyclif Bible was replaced by the gifted work of Tyndale in the 1520s, so the SBCL will one day be replaced by the work of a gifted translator or team of native Bengali translators, who will match the elegant simplicity of style found in the Bengali poet laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. A translation must begin somewhere, even if its first versions do not become national literary treasures.

**What About Orality?**

After all the discussion concerning the literary qualities of Scripture, one fact remains that challenges an exclusively literary evaluation of the Bible. In biblical times people generally did not read the Scriptures for themselves. Instead, as Charles Cosgrove reminds us,

> The ancient chirograph was to be read aloud by a skilled reader (not read silently). Skilled readers dramatized with their voices and gestures when they read. This "theatrical" aspect of ancient reading of Scripture distances ancient oral performance of Scripture from silent reading in a print culture, as well as from the typical grave reading of Scripture from behind the lectern in most churches today. Ancient reading performance has greater affinities with the art of oral interpretation today.[42]

While it may be true that certain features of the biblical text might be intensely literary (e.g., acrostic psalms[43]), it is obvious that large sections of Scripture (both OT and NT) were originally intended for oral reading.[44] Consider that the Torah was read "in the ears of the people" (Exod 24:7) and that the Lord prescribed that it be read in that fashion on a regular basis (Deut 31:11; cp. Josh 8:34-35; 2 Kgs 23:2; Neh 8:3, 18; 9:3; 13:1; 2 Cor 3:14). Prophetic revelation was also read publicly, as in the days of Jeremiah (36:6; 51:61). Christ Himself read the Scriptures publicly in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16; cp. Acts 13:27; 15:21). Paul instructed the Colossians to read his epistle in their assembly as well as in the assembly of the Laodiceans (Col 4:16). He also left a

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[42] Charles H. Cosgrove, "English Bible Translation in Postmodern Perspective: Reflections on a Critical Theory of Holistic Translation," 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), 168-69.

[43] Watson indicates that acrostics are non-oral, "being intended to appeal to the eye rather than the ear" (*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 191).

[44] For a detailed discussion of both the oral and the written nature of the Bible, see Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

similar instruction for the Thessalonians (1 Thess 5:27) and exhorted Timothy not to neglect the public reading of Scripture (1 Tim 4:13).

Audio-visual presentations of Scripture are, therefore, a return to the original environment of the proclamation of God's Word. The proper cantillation of such readings, with significant pauses, variation of tone, gestures, and dramatical flourishes may do more to convey the original intent than the printed page could ever accomplish. When read properly, themes, repetitions, assonance, and even chiasms might be clearer to the hearer than to the isolated silent reader. Tyndale's wonderful literary cadences in the English translation of the Bible are far more impressive when read publicly with proper inflection than they are in private, silent reading. I suspect that the same is true with all of the great literary Bible translations. Translators must never neglect producing a translation that performs well in public reading.

Oral reading draws the attention of both reader and hearer to the text as a whole. In order for the translator to give proper heed to the oral rhetoric of the text, he or she will need to perform grammatical analysis at text level as well as clause level.[45] In the end, the orality of the text brings the translator to the same point as a proper awareness of the literality of the text. Both remind us that we need to rise above our traditional micro-analysis of the biblical text to see the forest rather than majoring on leaves, twigs, and bark.

## Conclusion

Whether or not a given translation is great literature, there is no doubt about the literary excellence of the Scriptures in their original languages. Obviously, each biblical text has its own literary qualities that affect the reader. Those qualities depend on the vocabulary, syntax, style, and genre of any particular passage. Genealogies, for example, are quite different from the effects of the first line of poetry in Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard." Linguistically, the literary effects of Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek are not always identical, nor are they exactly reproducible. The goal of a Bible translator must be to reproduce the literary effects as closely as possible within the limitations of a different language (be it English or Bengali).

Translators must pursue clarity, vividness of expression, literary ambiguity, effective rhythm, and oral appropriateness. If translators achieve these criteria, the translation will be memorable. Speakers of the receptor language will welcome the translation and it will change their lives. With these things in view, "challenging" does not describe the task of the Bible translator as well as "daunting" or even "intimidating." But, with the help of God, it is a task to which more evangelicals should devote their lives. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (ESV).

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[45] Cf. Talstra, "A Hierarchy of Clauses in Biblical Hebrew Narrative," 89.