What Is Truth in Translation?: The Issue of Accuracy in Translating the Bible

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Introduction

What good is a Bible translation that conveys no meaning—or, worse yet, that conveys wrong meaning? Erroneous translation can hinder the divinely intended effect of God's Word upon the recipient. In order to achieve accuracy and clarity translators wrestle with different ways to express the text's meaning. Translating the Bible accurately requires careful attention to meaning rather than form alone. A good Bible translation conveys truth without confusion. Few translators would dispute this point. However, agreement over the necessity for accuracy has sometimes taken second place to political, social, or religious influences that can dominate the final readings in a Bible version.

Ideally, truth (or, true meaning) should be the ultimate standard in Bible translation. Translators have employed expanded translation, idiomatic translation, and ambiguous translation in various passages in an attempt to be truthful in translation. Each methodology has its benefits and its problems. All three are open to abuse. All three overlap from time to time, as the chosen examples for each will show.

Expanded Translation

Natural expression in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek may look and sound very different from natural expression in English, French, German, or Bengali. Such differences bring the Bible translator face to face with a major problem. What if the correct meaning of the Hebrew text cannot be conveyed by natural expression in a receptor language like English without adding words or phrases that would not represent anything present in the original form?

An example occurs in various English version expansions of Psalm 69:22 [Heb 23]. From a Hebrew text consisting of only six words, English versions have expanded the wording to as many as twenty-two English words (KJV). Nine italicized words in the 22-word KJV signal the expansion. Italics indicate that the translators found it necessary (in their opinion) to add words not found in the Hebrew forms in order to make the meaning clear. Such expansion could also be described as paraphrastic. A paraphrase is "a restatement of a text or passage in another form or other words, often to clarify meaning."[1] Expansions of Psalm 69:22 attempt to convey the meaning of the text with accuracy. One has to admit that an overly literal translation of this verse would be more

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[1] William Morris, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), 951.

difficult to understand. On such occasions translators regularly try to resolve the puzzle for the reader. The KJV translators did so, and so have many others after them.

Sound translation principles require the transference of exact meaning from the original text to the receptor language, while retaining as much of the wording as possible. Weston Fields, in his discussion about translating metaphors, similes, and idioms, made the following observation:

> Frequently one encounters the erroneous belief that a difference in *number* and *order* of words in the transference from the source language to the receptor language somehow equals a difference in *meaning* in the translation. Every translator, however, from the third-grade student who is studying French to the seasoned scholar who has years of translation experience, knows this is not true. Yet, among Bible translators and biblical language scholars there is very often a distrust of a translator who espouses the translation of meaning, or who casts Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic idioms (especially dead metaphors) into idiomatic English. . . .
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> If one were to ask someone "*Comment ça va?*" ("How are you?"), and he were to reply, "*Comme ci, comme ça*" ("So, so"), the translator has not distorted the message, nor has he added anything to the *meaning,* when he translates the French by the English "Not too good, not too bad," nor has he deleted anything if he translates "So, so." In the one case there are six words to the French four, and in the other case two, but the meaning is the same.[2]

There must be some flexibility in translation so that the meaning is not lost by an overly formal or literal translation. Such flexibility is conducive to expansions.

From the 1950's through the 1980's English versions of Psalm 69:22 manifest an economy of words (13-16 words). More recent literal translations, however, tend to employ expansions approaching the length of the KJV (17-20 words). In addition, most recent translations show a preference for avoiding italicization to indicate expansion:

יְהִי־שֻׁלְחָנָם לִפְנֵיהֶם לְפָח
וְלִשְׁלוֹמִים לְמוֹקֵשׁ:

Literally: Let-become their-table before-them for-trap
and-at-peace [*or*, for-allies] for-snare.

KJV 1769 (22 words): Let their table become a snare before them:
and *that which should have been* for *their* welfare, *let it become* a trap.

ESV 2001 (20 words): Let their own table before them become a snare;
and when they are at peace, let it become a trap.

NAU 1995 (19 words): May their table before them become a snare;
And when they are in peace, *may it become* a trap.

NET 2003 (19 words): May their dining table become a trap before them!
May it be a snare for that group of friends!

HCSB 1999-2003 (18 words): Let their table set before them be a snare,

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[2] Weston W. Fields, "The Translation of Biblical Live and Dead Metaphors and Similes and Other Idioms," *Grace Theological Journal* 2/2 (Fall 1981): 192-93.

> and let it be a trap for [their] allies.

> NLT 1996 (17 words): Let the bountiful table set before them become a snare,
> and let their security become a trap.

> NIV 1984 (16 words): May the table set before them become a snare;
> may it become retribution and a trap.

> RSV 1952 (16 words): Let their own table before them become a snare;
> let their sacrificial feasts be a trap.

> REB 1989 (15 words): May their table be a snare to them
> and a trap when they feel secure.

> NJPS 1985 and NRSV 1989 (13 words): May their table be a trap for them,
> a snare for their allies.

> TEV 1976 (13 words): May their banquets cause their ruin;
> may their sacred feasts cause their downfall.

Additional adjectives before "table" in ESV ("their own table"), NET ("their dining table") and NLT ("the bountiful table") are expansions, although ESV's "own" could be argued on the basis of the repetition of the 3mp pronominal suffixes in close proximity. NET's "dining" is an explanatory addition attempting greater clarity. However, the phrase "dining table" evokes an anachronistic picture for the Western reader who might visualize people gathered around a table like what we use in our homes in America. Instead, it may have been a mat on the floor or, in an upper-class environment, a low table like those used by traditional Japanese homes. NLT's "the bountiful table" inserts a concept unwarranted by context that misleads the reader into thinking that the term "bountiful" is actually there.[3] NLT also removed "their" from before "table," causing the text to suffer from a reduction as well as expansion. NIV's "retribution" in the second line appears to be influenced by the LXX in order to provide an intentional harmonization with Romans 11:9.[4] TEV's translation is not nearly as literal as the others in this sampling and represents a third way to interpret וְלִשְׁלוֹמִים.[5]

According to Matthew 21:37, a certain landowner planted a vineyard and built a tower. A different cultural setting might require an explanatory expansion for "tower." For example, the Aguaruna Indians of Peru build towers if they have enemies who are expected to attack. When the enemy approaches, the Aguaruna flee from their houses to the protection of the tower, which gives them a strategic advantage over the enemy during the ensuing battle.[6] The form is similar to the biblical tower, but the function is

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[3] Were the translators of NLT influenced by TEV's "banquets"? An interesting dynamic is the way in which interpretive translations influence other translations in a direction further removed from the text.

[4] LXX's εἰς ἀνταπόδοσιν may indicate that the translators read the consonantal text as לִשְׁלוּמִים. Paul's choice of the LXX should not be taken as evidence that the Hebrew text should be altered. See the suggestion of Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1991), 5:460.

[5] The second line of TEV rests upon an understanding that לִשְׁלוֹמִים refers to "peace/fellowship offerings."

[6] Mildred Larson, *A Manual for Problem Solving in Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 106. Larson presented this example from Matt 21:33 and the examples in John

different. Translators of Matthew 21:33 among the Aguaruna would need to consider the viability of either using a footnote or modifying the translation by specifying the function: "a tower *for a watchman*" or "a *guard* tower." This type of expansion may be required in order to provide an accurate and unambiguous translation.

Legitimate translational expansion should not be confused with the insertion of imaginative details not indicated by the original text.[7] Metzger offers an example of just such a paraphrase in Amos 1:1 of *The Living Bible*: "Amos was a herdsman living in the village of Tekoa. All day long he sat on the hillsides watching the sheep, keeping them from straying."[8] The second sentence is the imaginative expansion. Granted, *The Living Bible* does not claim to be a literal translation and admits up front to being a paraphrase, but the example still serves as an illustration of just how far some translators will go to convey the text of Scripture interpretively. The danger inherent in employing paraphrastic expansion in versions claiming to be more literal Bible translations is a valid issue. In his book about choosing a Bible translation, Bob Thomas observes that,

> The more remote a translation is from the original, the less it reflects the
> precise meaning of the original and the more it reflects the interpretations of
> the translator(s). That remoteness entails a hindrance if one's purpose is to
> discover the meaning of the Bible. The translator's interpretations loom larger
> in the translation in proportion to the amount of freedom exercised in the
> translation technique. The reason for this is that the translator chooses his own
> ideas about the meaning of the text to replace the literal rendering of the text.
> A student of Scripture usually seeks the meaning of the text, not an
> interpretation of the translator. If he wants someone's interpretation, he will
> consult commentaries on the text. Free translations and paraphrases are
> especially harmful where the translator has erred in his interpretation. That
> misleads a student of the Bible as to what God actually said without the reader
> being aware that he is accepting someone's interpretation rather than what the
> original text says.[9]

It is the better part of wisdom to look upon the more free and paraphrastic translations as concise one-volume Bible commentaries needing to be compared with more literal translations. Commentaries and paraphrastic translations do have their place in the study of Scripture. The actual text of Scripture itself, however, supersedes both. However, we have to admit that any translation is actually a commentary. Adele Berlin observes that this is especially true even though a literal translation tends to obscure the

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6:35 and 10:12 from Central and South American Indian languages as problems to be solved by translators. The purpose of her translation manual is to provide an awareness of the types of problems to be encountered, not the solutions to those problems. The principles involved in finding solutions are contained in the companion volume: John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974). Chapter 13 (191-211) contains an extensive discussion of the handling of lexical equivalence problems. A third volume in this set is Kathleen Callow, *Discourse Considerations in Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974). Although these three volumes are 30 years old, they are still tremendously relevant and valuable as resources for Bible translators.

[7] See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 180.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Robert L. Thomas, *How to Choose a Bible Version: An Introductory Guide to English Translations* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor/Christian Focus, 2000), 98-99.

fact: "[W]hen a translation becomes freer, or departs too radically from the literal rendering of the text, it becomes unmasked for what it is—someone's interpretation."[10] Despite the careful couching of terms in favor of literal translations, we must not assume that "the meaning of the foreign text can avoid change in translation, that the foreign writer's intention can travel unadulterated across a linguistic and cultural divide."[11] Translation is inevitably interpretive. No literal or dynamic English translation, for example, can ever reproduce the fullness, beauty, and impact of Psalm 19 with its intricate and interwoven poetic devices consisting of repetition, parallelism, chiasm, inclusion, tricola, and plays on word that depend upon delicate shades of meaning that create tension and heighten interest. The Hebrew is unmatchable. A text like Nahum 3:1-3 is equally irreproducible in another language with its sophisticated use of synonyms, repetition, and internal parallelism to convey the horrors, sounds, and sights of war in the streets of Nineveh. Where is the English translation that can formally represent the first three Hebrew words of Nahum 2:11 (בּוּקָה וּמְבוּקָה וּמְבֻלָּקָה) with the assonance and paronomasia that imitates the sound (onomatopoeia) of a jug (בַּקְבֻּק) emptying its contents to picture the demise of Nineveh?

Certain biblical genres might be more conducive to a formal and technical translation technique. Genealogies, for example, exist in such narrowly defined situations and reasonably standardized terminology that they survive the translation process well with little domestication. A few other genres also might do well in a highly formal translation. For example, Roland Murphy argues eloquently for more of a superliteral, word-for-word rendering for Hebrew proverbs.[12] He demonstrates that a woodenly literal translation displays the proverb's punch as compared to the smoothed-out translation normally employed in the vast majority of literal English translations from the earlier KJV to the more recent NRSV. The original Hebrew is deliberate in its verbal density. Compare the following two renderings of Proverbs 16:18 -

Literal:	Before breaking, pride;
	and before stumbling, height of spirit.
ESV:	Pride goes before destruction,
	and a haughty spirit before a fall.

The second translation is unarguably smoother, but the addition of "goes" and the change in word order obscures the specific parallelism of the Hebrew. The more difficult and dense literal rendering causes the reader to stop and consider what the meaning might be. The reader must supply the smoothing of the translation for themselves. That accomplishes the purpose of the proverb—to challenge the reader to consider the saying and mull it over in his or her mind. Just consider some English proverbs in comparison:

Easy come, easy go.

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[10] 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 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 180-81. She rightly observes, "Translation is an abbreviated form of exegesis: exegesis that does not have the space to explain or justify itself" (181).

[11] Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1998), 5.

[12] E.g., Roland E. Murphy, "A Brief Note on Translating Proverbs," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60/4 (1998): 621-25.

Pretty is as pretty does.

ESV's translation of Proverbs 25:13 ("Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him") could be represented in an English proverbial style as "Faithful messenger, harvest snow."[13]

One could argue that this kind of translation for Hebrew proverbs would be better in the context of a commentary rather than in a Bible translation.[14] A commentary would allow discussion of the possible meanings and renderings of the proverb and present support for the meaning chosen by the commentator. Perhaps all commentaries would benefit from this type of inclusion. The format could include both the literal rendering and a parallel smooth rendering at the head of the comments.

In an internal biblical example, the writer of the Greek Gospel of Mark utilized expansion in 5:41 to clarify meaning. The original 1611 KJV helps illustrate various translation practices in dealing with expansions:

> And he tooke the damosell by the hand, and said vnto her, *Talitha cumi,*
> which is, being interpreted, Damosell (I say vnto thee) Arise.

Compare this to the 1769 revision in nearly all current editions of the KJV:

> And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is,
> being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise.

Note that the 1611 translators placed "I say unto thee" in parentheses to indicate that it was an addition in the Greek[15] and they employed italics to indicate that "Talitha cumi" was in a different language. Why was it necessary to add "I say unto thee"? Does the addition affect truth in translation? "Talitha cumi" is in Aramaic, the mother tongue of the Palestinians of Jesus' day. The Gospel writer provided his readers with a translation of the phrase into Greek so that non-Aramaic speakers would understand what Jesus had said to the young lady. In doing so, however, Mark added the words "I say unto you" in order to provide the information necessary to make the meaning clear to his readers. Those four English words (two words in the original Greek, σοὶ λέγω) were not in the Aramaic statement made by Jesus. Why was it necessary for Mark to add these words? It is possible that the expansion was necessary because the bare repetition of the form from Aramaic to Greek could not convey accurately and faithfully the meaning of the statement. It is also possible that by adding "I say unto you" in his translation, Mark was informing his readers that Jesus had not merely spoken, but had authoritatively commanded.

Thus, expansion is a valid means for expressing truth in translation. Its validity can even be supported by the biblical example of Mark 5:41 in the Greek NT. Mark 5:41 raises the question of idiomatic translation, because its expansion falls also into the realm of idiom in the Greek language.

Idiomatic Translation

Translating the Bible is like trying to take a picture of a bolt of lightning in mid-strike. Words and phrases can be exceedingly difficult to nail down. Idiomatic usage can

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[13] Ronald Knox, *The Trials of a Translator* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1949), 43.

[14] Murphy, "A Brief Note," 623.

[15] καὶ κρατήσας τῆς χειρὸς τοῦ παιδίου λέγει αὐτῇ· ταλιθα κουμ, ὅ ἐστιν μεθερμηνευόμενον· τὸ κοράσιον, σοὶ λέγω, ἔγειρε. Barbara and Kurt Aland et al., eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th rev. ed. (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 105.

be evasive and ephemeral. The pursuit of properly-employed, understandable, and accurate idiom is an endless occupation. It is no wonder that a translation of the Bible into common language Bengali would occupy a team of translators for thirty-two years.[16]

Bible translators must maintain a delicate balance between being up-to-date and yet classical in the choice of idioms. Translators must ask, "What would an American say?" or "What would a Bengali say?" or "What would a Kosovar say?" Biblical events and conversations took place many centuries ago. If the translator is too modern in his or her rendition, it might appear to be making fun of the text or, worse, it might uproot the text from its historical and cultural setting. Listen to Ronald Knox:

> A Biblical phrase like 'O King, live for ever!' has got to be changed; nobody ever talked like that in English. But you must not change it into 'I hope that your Majesty's life may be spared indefinitely'. You must get back to the language of a period when palace etiquette was more formal, 'Long life to the King's majesty!'—something like that. [17]

Accurate translation requires faithfulness to meaning. A simple transfer of vocabulary by using a dictionary cannot fulfill the transformation of the original Hebrew or Greek into a totally different language with its own forms (an idiomatic translation). Dictionary translation can result in an indecipherable message. In the days dominated by the use of telegrams rather than email, international telegrams had a bad reputation for being inaccurately translated. "Genevieve suspended for prank" was the original wording for a cable that was sent to Russia. When the Russian translation was received and translated back into English, it read: "Genevieve hanged for juvenile delinquency."[18] That is what can happen with a dictionary translation.

In an age when biblical literacy is plummeting to all time lows, we cannot assume that everyone understands that a simple phrase like "the children of Israel" or "the sons of Israel" do not refer either to infants alone or male offspring alone. The Hebrew בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל is most often employed as an idiom meaning "Israelites." It refers to all Israelites, young and old, male and female. Yet, to remove the form in the interest of an accurate meaning would be especially discomforting for many of our black brothers and sisters among whom "the children of Israel" is still a very meaningful phrase. With this difficulty in view, therefore, some restraint is necessary if we hope to produce an acceptable Bible translation within a single culture consisting of various sub-groups.

Attempting to be too up to date has its perils. As Sijbolt Noorda reminds us, "nothing ages faster than modern usage ('those who are married to the present will very soon be widowed')."[19] Translations of ancient texts that read too much like today's magazines do not give the impression of authenticity. Novelty wears thin. In the end, people tend to gravitate back to the familiar even if they have to put up with a little more opacity or obscurity. This is what accounts for high interest in a translation like the ESV.

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[16] The author of this paper was personally involved in that translation project from 1981 until 1996. During that time the team translated the entire OT and performed a revision of the NT that had been completed and published in its first edition prior to his arrival in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

[17] Ronald Knox, *The Trials of a Translator* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1949), 113.

[18] I've been unable to relocate my source for this illustration that dates back to the late 1960's.

[19] 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 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 14.

Due to its literality it has a sense of familiarity. A translation like NET Bible is more highly prized for its notes than for its translation per se. The latter has the attraction of being an exegetically technical commentary that aids the reader to better understand the text of Scripture, but, like the classroom translations of Hebrew professors, the translation will not be the one that people memorize or turn to in a time of crisis. Here we touch upon another ethical dilemma. Lawrence Venuti's observation about translation in general is disconcertingly close to what has occurred in the realm of Bible translation production: "The academic veneration of foreign languages and literatures is disingenuous as well. Fueled by a sense of self-preservation, it doesn't value the text itself so much as the text inscribed with whatever interpretation currently prevails among academic specialists."[20] We need look no further than how much impact prevailing interpretations of the biblical text in SBL circles have enticed and affected "wannabe" scholars in ETS circles. The results include an increase in textual emendations and the multiplication of innovative translations in the evangelical camp.

Lack of restraint together with commitment to innovation can mean the demise of a Bible translation. A case in point would be the NEB OT, which was dominated by the brilliant eccentricities of G. R. Driver. John Rogerson, who was at the time a student of Driver's, recalls that the Dutch referred to the NEB "as the new English Targum."[21] Due to this perception, Driverisms were targeted for removal by the OT team for the later Revised English Bible (1989).

There is really no distinction between accuracy of meaning and faithfulness of translation. An inaccurate meaning in a translation is unfaithful to the text even though the same number of words and the same forms may have been employed. The study of how languages structure meaning is called semantics. Semantics is not a modern development.[22] The ancient Roman grammarian, Varro, wrote a treatise in which he announced that he had discovered 228 distinct meanings for one Latin word for *good*.[23] In some languages the term (or terms) for *good* would be impossible to use for all 228 of those meanings.

Each context in which a word is used determines its meaning. In Bible translation it is rarely possible to maintain one translation for all occurrences of the same Hebrew or Greek term. A suitable example is the variety of terms used by English Bibles to translate the Hebrew verb meaning *be holy* or *sanctify*. In the KJV this Hebrew verb is translated by eleven different English verbs. The New International Version (NIV) also uses eleven; the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and Revised Standard Version (RSV) each

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[20] Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, 32.

[21] John Rogerson, "Can a Translation of the Bible Be Authoritative?," 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 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 24.

[22] Good examples of recent studies in the field of semantics and biblical languages include D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984) and Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983).

[23] Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Gift of Tongues," in *The World of Language: A Reader in Linguistics*, Robert N. Hudspeth and Donald F. Sturtevant (New York: American Book Company, 1967), 27.

employ ten. If the meaning is to be accurately conveyed, such semantic variety in translation is not optional, it is necessary.[24]

It is difficult to find an exact equivalent for a number of Hebrew words in other languages. Beginning Hebrew students tend to translate *nephesh* as "soul." However, *nephesh* has a much broader range of meanings in its 754 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. It can mean "appetite" (Num 11:6, NASB; Prov 23:2, KJV), "breath" (Gen 1:30, NRSV; Job 41:21, KJV), "life" (Gen 19:17, KJV, NKJV), "himself" (1 Sam 18:3, NASB, NIV), and "throat" (Job 24:12, NRSV; Isa 5:14, NASB).

For translators, the variety of synonyms in the receptor language provides an additional challenge to find a viable equivalent for a Greek or Hebrew term. In Bengali the word commonly used for "anger" (*rag*) may be used for the same Greek or Hebrew word as long as it is referring to human beings. If, however, the referent is God's anger, a different term must be used in Bengali since the Bengali term refers to uncontrolled anger (something never true of God). With this kind of situation in mind, the SBCL project proceeded under the principle that **the meaning of the original text takes precedence over the form. Contextual consistency has priority over verbal consistency. A word in the Hebrew or Greek may have a different meaning in a different context—that difference should be carefully observed.** Guidelines for implementing this principle include the following:

- No original language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) term should be automatically translated with just one and the same Bengali term in all contexts.
- Figurative language and idioms may be replaced by parallel figures or idioms in Bengali only where no historical or cultural difficulty is caused and only when the new figure or idiom has the same meaning in Bengali.
- Form should be retained whenever a literal translation produces an accurate, meaningful, and natural expression in Bengali. That form which is closest to the original text will be used if the exact form does not fit these criteria.
- Details of culture (customs, vocations, clothing, foods, and ceremonies), geography (places and features, climate and weather elements), and history (nations, empires, and events) should be retained even if they are not within the range of common knowledge for Bengali-speaking peoples. However, classifiers or determinatives may be added which make the terms

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[24] This is in total agreement with the translators of the KJV. In their "The Translators to the Reader" they declared: "An other thing we thinke good to admonish thee of (gentle Reader) that wee haue not tyed our selues to an vniformitie of phrasing, or to an identitie of words, as some peraduenture would wish that we had done, because they obserue, that some learned men some where, haue beene as exact as they could that way. Truly, that we might not varie from the sense of that which we had translated before, if the word signified the same thing in both places (for there bee some wordes that bee not of the same sense euery where) we were especially carefull, and made a conscience, according to our duetie. But, that we should expresse the same notion in the same particular word; as for example, if we translate the *Hebrew* or *Greeke* word once by *Purpose*, neuer to call it *Intent*; if one where *Iourneying*, neuer *Traueiling*; if one where *Thinke*, neuer *Suppose*; if one where *Paine*, neuer *Ache*; if one where *Ioy*, neuer *Gladnesse*, &c. Thus to minse the matter, wee thought to sauour more of curiositie then wisedome, and that rather it would breed scorne in the Atheist, then bring profite to the godly Reader. For is the kingdome of God become words or syllables? why should wee be in bondage to them if we may be free, vse one precisely when wee may vse another no lesse fit, as commodiously?" – "The Translators to the Reader" in *The Holy Bible 1611 Edition: King James Version* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982, reprint of the 1st ed.).

identifiable in accordance with Bengali usage (for example, "Jordan *river*," "Bethany *village*," "Antioch *city*," or "*King* Hezekiah").

The kind of problem included in this last guideline involves the matter of lexical equivalence across languages. Each original language term used in the Bible had its own form and function. Some terms have a corresponding term in the translator's language, others have none. Those which have a corresponding term might be equivalent in form but not in function or, perhaps, in function but not in form. The translator must handle such situations with wisdom akin to that of Solomon. Knox explains this matter of equivalency as follows:

> Words are not coins, dead things whose value can be mathematically computed. You cannot quote an exact English equivalent for a French word, as you might quote an exact English equivalent for a French coin. Words are living things, full of shades of meaning, full of associations; and, what is more, they are apt to change their significance from one generation to the next. The translator understands his job feels, constantly, like Alice in Wonderland trying to play croquet with flamingoes for mallets and hedge-hogs for balls; words are for ever eluding his grasp.[25]

Sometimes the reader of the OT in English finds that there is a surprising lack of certain words that one would expect, given the various contexts presented within the text. One example is the absence of the word "danger" in the English translations. It never occurs in the KJV OT nor in the NASB OT. In the ESV, NIV, and RSV it can be found a scant three times (1 Sam 20:21; Prov 22:3; 27:12; NRSV has these three plus 1 Sam 30:6; NJPS uses "danger" in 1 Sam 20:21; 30:6; Jon 1:4; Pss 57:2; 119:109). Again we can appreciate Knox's discussion of this phenomenon:

> It is a harder part of the translator's job to notice the negative effect produced by the absence of English mannerisms. … Now, it is nonsense to suppose that the Hebrew mind has no such notion as danger; why is there no word for it? The answer can only be, that in Hebrew you express the same idea by a nearly-allied word which has to do duty, also, for slightly different ideas; a word like 'affliction', 'tribulation' or 'trouble'. That means, that a good translation of the Old Testament will sometimes give you 'danger' or 'peril', where the stock translations give you 'fear' or 'terror'. The rendering which does not mention danger or peril jars imperceptibly on the mind.[26]

In our era of science, math, and computer technology, we have grown accustomed to the concept of equivalents. "Wishful thinking and early training in arithmetic have convinced a majority of people that there are such things as equals in the world."[27] When it comes to a Bible translation, those imbued with this conviction concerning equivalency are disturbed by such things as the absence in Bengali of a word or phrase meaning "thank you." Due to the Westerners who travel to or live and work in Bangladesh, the international airports now use the Bengali word *dhonyobad* (literally, "blessed") for the Western concept of "thank you." One culture has imposed its practices and concepts upon another culture's language in a way that still grates on the Bengali mind.

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[25] Ronald Knox, *The Trials of a Translator* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1949), 13.

[26] Ibid., 37-38.

[27] Gregory Rabassa, "No Two Snowflakes Are Alike: Translation as Metaphor," in *The Craft of Translation*, ed. by John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1.

Let's look at another example that might illustrate the issue of idiomatic equivalency. The Chontal of Mexico make bread for special fiesta days only. Tortillas are the daily food. In such a setting, how should a translator treat Jesus' statement, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35)? To a Christian in the United States, "I am the tortilla of life" would seem about as serious as "I am the pizza of life." At first blush the form seems different even though the function is the same. The tortilla, however, may be nearer to the kind of bread used in ancient Palestine than the modern loaves of bread with which we are most familiar.

> The large pone or thick, light loaf of the West is unknown in the East. The common oriental cake or loaf is proverbially thin. . . . It is still significantly customary at a Syrian meal to take a piece of such bread and, with the ease and skill of long habit, to fold it over at the end held in the hand so as to make a sort of spoon of it, which then is eaten along with whatever is lifted by it out of the common dish (cf. Mt **26** 23).[28]

In this particular case, therefore, what appears to be a viable cultural equivalent is not. The Western understanding of "bread" provides an inaccurate translation.

In ancient Palestine wolves were a peril to sheep (cf. John 10:12). Tropical areas around the world may not have wolves. Tigers, leopards, and jackals are the forms of wildlife preying upon domesticated animals. Should the translator make a cultural substitution? If the form is necessary to the truth being taught, it is obvious that a cultural substitute should not be made. What if the form is not significant? What if the same meaning and the same truth can be maintained with another form? That is when the problem becomes more sticky. There is not only the problem of historical fidelity, but of symbolic fidelity in the total context of Scripture. The SBCL translation also has a guideline covering theological symbolism:

- Words having symbolic value within the theological framework of the Bible (such as *the Lamb of God*, *blood*, and *cross*) should be retained.

D. A. Carson forcefully argues that one altered word not only violates the symbolic and prophetic consistency of Scripture and the historical context of the Scripture, it can also require a large number of attendant changes.

> Suppose, for instance, a tribe has a long tradition of sacrificing pigs, but has never so much as heard of sheep. Is it in that case justifiable to render John 1:29, "Look, the swine of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"? I would argue strongly in the negative, not only because of the importance of historical particularity . . . but because of the plethora of rich allusions preserved in Scripture across the sweep of salvation history. In what sense does Jesus "fulfill" the Old Testament sacrificial system if that system sacrificed lambs on the Day of Atonement and at Passover, whereas Jesus is portrayed as a swine? How then will John 1:29 relate to Isa. 52:13—53:12, the fourth servant song, or to images of the warrior lamb in the Apocalypse (e.g. Revelation 5:6)? Shall we change *all* such references to "pigs" ("All we like swine have gone astray . . . ")? And if so, do we then make the biblical pig-references clean, and designate some other animal unclean? No; it is surely simpler to preserve "lamb" in the first instance. If this involves inventing a

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[28] Geo. B. Eager, "Bread," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 5 vols., ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), 1:516.

new word, so be it: a brief note could explain that the word refers to an animal
frequently sacrificed by the people of the Bible, along with a succinct
description of the animal's characteristics.[29]

Accurate communication of a message from one culture (that of the ancient Near
East) to another culture (such as that of modern day Bangladesh or United States) has
many difficulties. The two cultures (ancient and modern) do have some things in
common, but many things are different. One such difference involves the way we
perceive or think about common actions or events.

Consider the statement "I will be giving an exam next week in geography." To an
American those words mean that a teacher will be giving a geography exam to his or her
students. For a Bengali (or, a Brit), however, it means that a student will be taking a
geography exam. The verb forms are the exact opposite in the two languages. In Bengali
the phrase *giving an exam* is used of the student's activity while the phrase *taking an
exam* is used of the teacher's activity.

Bible translation, by reason of its ancient near eastern setting, is an exercise in
cross-cultural communication. It is often necessary to transform information linguistically
in order to communicate accurately with someone in another cultural setting.
Transformation, however, does not include the freedom to alter the cultural realities of
the biblical text. Transformation of linguistic form (as in *give an exam* for *take an exam*)
is not the same as transformation of strictly cultural forms. It would be a matter of
disinformation if the translator were to replace Palestine's geographical realities (such as
rocky cliffs, sandy deserts, and dry streambeds), climatic realities (such as snow), or
vocational realities (such as potters, shepherds, and camel drivers) with another culture's
geographical, climatic, or vocational realities. Bangladesh has no deserts and no snow,
but it is not accurate translation to convert snow to rain and deserts to jungles. The
Bible's cultural, geographical, and historical details must be left intact.

A seemingly harmless replacement of *recline at food* or *recline at table* with *sit
down to eat* may produce confusion for the reader. "We are going to have a tough job
imagining how John managed to get his head on Jesus' breast. Preservation of
descriptions of what is to us an alien custom, reclining at tables, makes it possible to
understand a later action, John placing his head on Jesus' breast."[30]

This problem of cultural, historical, geographical, and climatic elements in the
translation of the Scriptures is the point at which the meaning of *idiomatic translation*
sometimes takes a perverse turn. The common usage of *idiomatic translation* is often
applied to free translation involving cultural substitution. An example would be the
substitution of *pig* for *lamb* in a cultural setting where sheep are unknown but pigs are
familiar. Sound Bible translation principles are incompatible with that kind of *idiomatic
translation*.

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[29] D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence in Bible Translation," *Notes on Translation* 121 (Oct
1987): 11-12. See Carson's revised and updated thoughts on this topic in "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), 101.

[30] Carson, "The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence," 10.

Ambiguity in Translation

      Since the original text of Scripture possesses words and expressions whose meanings are "ambiguous and cannot be determined in a crystal-clear way," Wim Weren asks, "Is a translator permitted, in such cases, to create more clarity than is offered by the original?"[31] The use of words and forms is governed by more than just grammatical rules. Meaning is the ultimate arbiter. For example, "the house is near the bank" is ambiguous by itself. Which *bank* is intended? Is it the financial institution or the edge of a river? Apparently the same vocabulary and the same form has at least two very different meanings. Some languages, like Spanish, have two different forms for those two meanings: *banco* and *orilla*. Spanish, therefore, removes the ambiguity by means of discriminating vocabulary. If such distinct terms are unavailable, how should translators deal with potential ambiguity? How should they handle cases where there seem to be no equivalent to a biblical word or concept in the receptor language? Is it possible that the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek of the Scriptures in any specific instance might be inherently ambiguous? Could there be occasions for intentional ambiguity?

      First, let's look at perhaps the most apparent and seemingly unnecessary ambiguity in OT translations. The translators of the Greek OT (the Septuagint, circa 250 B.C.) came under the influence of a religious custom observed by at least some Jews of that time. They did not pronounce the Tetragrammaton (יהוה). Jews living in Egypt in those days were not necessarily orthodox in their beliefs. Indeed, if anything, Egyptian Jews were exceedingly syncretistic in their faith—mixing many pagan idolatrous concepts with the religion of the OT. Yehezkel Kaufmann described the beliefs of Jews living at Elephantine, an island in the Nile River, from about 525 B.C. onward, as not representative of the religion of Israel.

> They had become assimilated linguistically and intermarried with their neighbors. Whatever "idolatry" they brought with them from their native land cannot but have been heightened in these circumstances. In contrast to the Babylonian colony of exiles they had no prophets among them, though they did have priests. Their religion can therefore be used only in a most qualified way to reconstruct the popular religion of Israel in Palestine.[32]

If such a description of Egyptian Jews is accurate and equally applicable to those living in Alexandria, it would be risky to adopt their practice with regard to the pronunciation of the divine name.

      Alexandrian Jews refused to pronounce the divine title *Yahweh* because of a misunderstanding of the Third Commandment (Exod 20:7). The custom at that time was to substitute the Hebrew word *'Adonai* ("Lord") for *YHWH* (יהוה). In their Greek translation Alexandrian Jewish translators utilized *Kurios* ("Lord"). This departure from the actual Hebrew text made the translation acceptable to the target audience (Jews in Alexandria, Egypt). However, according to R. Laird Harris,

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[31] Wim J. C. Weren, "Translation, Interpretation and Ideology: A Response to Jeremy Punt," 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 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 126.

[32] Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 149.

> The result seems really to have been a profanation of a different kind. Not to use the name of God seems to profane it just as the coarse use of the Name would have done. But the facts are plain. The ancient Hebrews, naturally, pronounced and wrote the name of God.[33]

Actually, this caused confusion since two different Hebrew names of God (*Yahweh* and *'Adonai*) have been translated identically. Later the Syriac Peshitta and the Latin Vulgate followed suit. Readers of these three translations were unable to distinguish between these two significant divine names. English translations continued the practice with one helpful modification: "Lord" (the last three letters set in small capitals) represents *Yahweh* while "Lord" represents *'Adonai*. In the public reading of the Scriptures, however, the listener is unable to distinguish between "Lord" and "Lord" since the pronunciations are identical. Modern Jews get around the problem of using *'Adonai* for two names by reading *Haššem* ("the Name") for *Yahweh* when they come upon that name in the text of the OT.

Translations representing *Yahweh* by "Lord" are resorting to a cultural substitution. "Lord" could be termed a dynamic equivalent, since it purportedly represents an attempt to produce in the reader an identical response to that of a third century B.C. Jewish reader. In this case the response is a reverential fear of speaking what is considered to be a holy name (*Yahweh*). However, the ultimate question should be: Did Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and other OT saints likewise refuse to pronounce the divine name of *Yahweh*? Perhaps later Jews unnecessarily modified the biblical text by their translation. Louis Hartman, in the *Encylopaedia Judaica*, explains that

> The true pronunciation of the name YHWH was never lost. Several early Greek writers of the Christian Church testify that the name was pronounced "Yahweh." This is confirmed, at least for the vowel of the first syllable of the name, by the shorter form Yah, which is sometimes used in poetry (e.g., Ex. 15:2) and the *-yahu* or *-yah* that serves as the final syllable in very many Hebrew names.[34]

The Standard Bengali Common Language (SBCL) OT translation consistently used *Shodaprobhu* (the name used in the older Bengali Bible) for *Yahweh*. For *'Adonai* the SBCL employed "Lord" (*Probhu*). Bengali has no capital letters, so it would be impossible for the translators to use a convention like that observed in most English translations. Our convention, however artificial, at least provides an audibly distinct nomenclature.

Robert Carroll summarized the reduction of both יהוה and אדני to "Lord/Lord" this way: "To reduce two very distinctive words to doing the duty of only one of the words is a most curious maltreatment and distortion of language by translators."[35] Such

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[33] R. Laird Harris, "The Pronunciation of the Tetragram," in *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies Prepared in Honor of Oswald Thompson Allis*, ed. by John H. Skilton ([Nutley, N.J.]: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), 215.

[34] Louis F. Hartman, "God, Names of," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1971), 7:680. For examples of the Christian writers to whom Hartman refers, see Harris, "Pronunciation," 223 — they include Theodoret of Cyros and Clement of Alexandria.

[35] Robert P. Carroll, "Between Lying and Blasphemy or On Translating a Four-Letter Word in the Hebrew Bible: Critical Reflections on 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,

euphemized circumlocution is more than a distortion of language, it is tantamount to a loss of intellectual and linguistic integrity. The problem is multiplied when the Hebrew has אדני יהוה (cf. Isa 7:7) and English translations utilize "Lord GOD" as though the Hebrew were אדני אלהים.

When an orthodox lay rabbi visited one of my Hebrew exegesis courses recently, I arranged to meet with him prior to the class so that I might ask if he would be offended if we pronounced the Tetragrammaton in accord with our normal practice. He expressed surprise that we would think that we should avoid pronouncing the Tetragrammaton. I was surprised when he informed me that the orthodox find no problem with saying "Yahweh." As he explained, the issue is the context and intent of the pronunciation of the divine name. He indicated that they employ the circumlocution only in contexts that have the potential of profaning or demeaning the character of God. Reading, interpretation, and discussion of the text of Scripture are not demeaning of the character of God. In such contexts pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton is acceptable.

Some of the texts from Qumran retained the paleo-Hebrew script for the Tetragrammaton even though the rest of the text is in the Jewish-Aramaic script adopted in the post-exilic period. Scribes thus drew attention to the presence of the divine title and, perhaps, to its pronunciation. At times scribes followed the same convention in a Greek (LXX) text. An example is a fragment of Zechariah 9 from the Greek Minor Prophets Scroll from Nahal Hever (8ḤevXIIgr).[36] Perhaps this ancient scribal practice should be imitated in our translations by representing the Tetragrammaton with four simple capitalized consonants: YHWH. It would be read as "Yahweh." The distinctiveness of the divine name would thus be preserved from obscurity, which, to this translator at least, is its own form of vulgarity and profanation of the ineffable name of God.

The divine name issue is an ambiguity imposed upon the text. The text is not ambiguous in this matter. What about those instances where the text itself is ambiguous? A prime example is "the revelation of Jesus Christ" in Revelation 1:1. The genitive can be either objective (= "the revelation about Jesus Christ") or subjective (= "the revelation given by Jesus Christ"). NLT ("This is a revelation from Jesus Christ") makes a choice for the readers where ESV, KJV, NKJV, NASB, and NIV leave it as a genitive without clarification. Perhaps Moisés Silva is correct in observing that it might be an unwarranted "assumption that typical English readers recognize an ambiguity when they see one."[37] However, we must either conclude that John was intentionally ambiguous or that he intended only one of the meanings of the genitive. The former conclusion would obligate the translator to retain the ambiguity; the latter would indicate that John believe that the

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Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 353: The Bible in the 21st Century 1 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 54.

[36] Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd rev ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001), 401 (Plate 21).

[37] Moisés Silva, "Are Translators Traitors? Some Personal Reflections," 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), 44. Failure to understand how the current readers look at the text is a recurring problem for translators of modern versions. For example, NT exegetes are "often so entrenched in the first-century world that we are blind as to how the English reader would look at the text today."—Daniel B. Wallace, "An Open Letter Regarding the NET Bible, New Testament," *Notes on Translation* 14/3 (2000): 5. The same type of observation can be made concerning OT exegetes.

context was sufficiently clear to direct the reader (and the translator) to the correct meaning.

Consider the ambiguity in biblical Hebrew in which בֵּן might mean "son," "child," "grandson," "great-grandson," "member," "an individual," "a young animal," or even "age." Those who seek to make an artificial distinction between what a text *says* and what it *means* might insist on translating the sentence בְּעֶצֶב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים in Genesis 3:16 as "with pain you will bear sons."[38] The context (and a little common sense—our wives can testify that there is just as much pain in bearing a daughter as a son) reveals that בָנִים must refer to "children." Feminists who point to the Hebrew usage of בֵּן as evidence for a misogynist biblical heritage focus too much on what the text *says* as opposed to what it *means*.

On the other hand, the psalmist might have intended a clause like נַפְשִׁי יְשׁוֹבֵב ("restores my soul," ESV) in Psalm 23:3 to carry more than one meaning. It might be purposefully ambiguous. Both physical refreshment and a deeper renewal might be intended. The first on the level of the metaphor[39] of the sheep and the second on the level of application to the human spirit.[40] Walter Bodine's discussion of ambiguity reminds one of Murphy's observations involving Hebrew proverbs:[41]

> When an ambiguity has been resolved, if the translator was right, the reader misses the opportunity to puzzle over the ambiguity—a process that may on occasion have been intended by the author. Much more importantly, if the translator's decision is wrong, then the reader is given the wrong meaning—one not intended by the author. In this case the reader is deprived of access to the original text, so that he or she has no opportunity to discover the author's intended meaning.[42]

Conclusion

Expansions, idiomatic translation, and even ambiguities are inevitable in even the most literal of Bible translations. Each, admittedly, might be abused from time to time either in isolated examples within excellent translations or repeatedly in less acceptable translations. In the end, Bible translators must seek sufficient faithfulness to the text of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Scriptures that they neither obscure the truth of the text nor violate its historical, geographical and cultural integrity. Failure to preserve truth and

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[38] See Mary Phil Korsak, "Translating the Bible: Bible Translations and Gender Issues," 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 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 146.

[39] "Biblical metaphors drop into our hearts like a seed in soil and make us think, precisely because they are not obvious at first. The translator who removes biblical metaphors to make the text 'easier' for readers may defeat the purpose of the Holy Spirit, who chose a metaphor in the first place. Metaphors grab us and work on us and in us." Raymond C. van Leeuwen, "We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation," *Christianity Today* 45/13 (Oct 12, 2001): 31.

[40] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 110: "In our context the two senses evidently interact."

[41] Murphy, "A Brief Note," 622: "a more literal rendering does justice to the ambiguity of a saying, an ambiguity that might be eliminated if the saying were translated in too bland a fashion."

[42] Walter R. Bodine, "The Bible in a World After Babel: On the Challenge of Bible Translation," *Notes on Translation* 14/4 (2000): 37.

integrity could result in a review similar to that which the classical scholar Richard
Bentley gave Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad* (1720): "It is a pretty poem,
Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer."[43]

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[43] Clifton Fadiman, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985),
456.