

## THE INTEGRATION OF OT THEOLOGY WITH BIBLE TRANSLATION

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*Translation of Scripture should be faithful to the original languages of the text, but should also communicate the text's meaning accurately to the modern reader so that he may reach proper theological conclusions. That poses a difficult challenge because of the great distance between classical Hebrew and various modern languages. Three passages from Genesis illustrate the interaction between translation and theology. Genesis 12:3 illustrates the importance of Hebrew syntax in translation. Genesis 15:5 reflects the effects of archaeology on translation and the importance of not excluding possible interpretations in passages with debated meanings. Genesis 19:24 shows how translations may obscure important details and why one should not impugn the theological positions of translators on the basis of renderings of isolated verses. Evangelicals with sound theology should take the lead in Bible translation because of the inevitable effect of a translator's theology on the accuracy of his translation.*

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Biblically based theology has no choice but to be wedded to Bible translation. One's theology is heavily dependent upon one's understanding of Scripture in translation, whether it is one's own or that of a published version. On the other side of the coin, Bible translation is inextricably linked with theology. As evangelicals we tend to guard ourselves with the dictate that the Scriptures in their original languages are the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. In reality, however, an OT theology teacher must communicate with his students via some form of translation. The students themselves will interact with theological teaching on the basis of the translations with which they are most familiar.

Translation of Scripture must aim for the elucidation of the whole truth and nothing but the truth of the ancient text for the modern reader. The array of translations for any particular text of the OT is like a smorgasbord. Quick-fix, calorie-heavy, junk-food translations offering little in the way of exegetical nourishment exist alongside protein rich translations that are hard to chew and practically impossible for the spiritually immature to digest. Each one contains its own dose of the text's truth. Even in the best of translations, unfortunately, a

balanced diet containing the whole truth is rare.

Bible translators are limited by the very nature of the daunting task to which they have committed themselves. They must immerse themselves as deeply as possible into each biblical text, mindful that it was produced in a specific cultural and historical context in the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. The problems inherent in recreating those components can be staggering. The text was the product of authorial intentions quite alien to those of the present day. The linguistic features, literary traditions, and cultural contexts are vastly changed and either lacking current vitality or poorly understood—sometimes both.<sup>1</sup>

Bible translation cannot be discussed without touching upon the linguistic distance between the ancient and modern languages. Classical Hebrew is very different from modern American English, Mexican Spanish, or Bangladeshi Bengali. That is vexing to the literalist tendencies we possess as evangelicals. In the attempt to close the gap between the ancient text and the present reader, some translations convert the modern receptor language into Hebraistic English or Hebraistic Spanish. However, that approach does not really resolve the distance problem. The resultant translation can end up misrepresenting the original author's meaning and tone. Why is it that in the vast majority of OT translations into English, the entire OT sounds the same?—tends to be identical in style and manner of expression? It certainly should not be due to the single language factor—viz., that it was penned in classical Hebrew.<sup>2</sup> Just as there are significant differences in the English styles of Walter Kaiser, Eugene Merrill, and Edwin Yamauchi in their respective histories of the OT, there are obvious differences between the Hebrew narrative styles of, for example, Moses and the Chronicler. Such contrasts should be readily apparent to the reader of the Pentateuch and 1 and 2 Chronicles in translation.

On the one hand, an overly idiomatic translation might produce insuperable difficulties by disrupting the intricate unity of Scripture. Such a translation could result in an equally idiomatic theology freely altering elements of biblical theology to fit a modern culture. Thus, in a society dominated by a particular sinful activity, one might reason that the Bible's condemnation of that sin was solely a cultural matter—perhaps the activity was simply unacceptable to the majority at that time and place. The converse would indicate that such activity might now be acceptable because of society's current acceptance. Does Scripture embody absolute truth (transcultural or universal truths) that ought to be preserved in either form or meaning? A translation must preserve such truths if it is to maintain theological as well as linguistic and cultural integrity.

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<sup>1</sup>Pace Burton Rafel, "Translating Medieval European Poetry," in *The Craft of Translation*, ed. John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989) 28.

<sup>2</sup>The author hastens to remind the reader that the OT was written in two languages: Hebrew and Aramaic. Unfortunately, the latter tends to be the ignored child in the biblical language curricula of Bible colleges and seminaries. Since Aramaic is seldom required, students graduate with M.Div. and Th.M. (or their equivalent) degrees without ability to read Dan 2:4–7:28 in the original language.

On the other hand, an overly literal translation might tend to obscure the meaning to such an extent that the reader either does not understand what it says or comes away with an erroneous conception of what the text means. A simple example might illustrate this point: בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“the sons of Israel”) has a meaning quite different in Gen 42:5 from that in 32:33. The first refers to literal sons (male offspring) while the second refers to a national or ethnic group. The older translations, by employing “the children of Israel,” add a third potential meaning: male and female offspring. The reader unfamiliar with the peculiarities of traditional biblical English might misunderstand some of the more vague references in a literal translation. Translating the national or ethnic references as “Israelites” would be much clearer as well as being more accurate with regard to the meaning intended by the Hebrew author.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, a single translation of the phrase is not adequate for the translator committed to accuracy of meaning as opposed to mere replication of form. As in the case of Aquila’s Greek translation of the OT, replication of form might indicate more clearly the translation’s base, but it would be of use only to those who have an extensive knowledge of classical Hebrew and significant exposure to the technicalities of textual criticism. It is more than foolish to foist such literalism upon the average reader, it smacks of both elitism and rebellion against the divine intent that the Scriptures be understood and obeyed (cf. Nehemiah 8; Matt 13:18-23).

In a worst case scenario, a translation might even obscure the truth, thereby limiting or hindering the development of a consistent theology—consistent, that is, with the original text. An examination of various translations of select texts in the Book of Genesis reveals the dynamic interaction of translation and theology. For the sake of convenience, the texts will be discussed in their canonical order.

### Genesis 12:3

The Mosaic record of Yahweh’s pronouncement of blessing through Abraham is a text whose translation has significant theological implications. In some translations, this text might imply a kind of double predestination.<sup>4</sup> Again, its translation might be either a direct or an obscure reference to divinely bestowed

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<sup>3</sup>The debate over gender-inclusive language in Bible translation is a recent theologically charged example involving the biblical employment of identical phraseology carrying vastly different intended meanings. Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker/Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1998); Wayne Grudem, *What’s Wrong with Gender-Neutral Bible Translations?* (Libertyville, Ill.: Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1997).

<sup>4</sup>Double predestination teaches a dual election: an election to salvation and an election to damnation. “Calvin called this a ‘horrible decree,’ but nevertheless held it because he found it in the Bible. Others say that God actively chooses those who are to receive eternal life, and passes by all the others, leaving them in their self-chosen sins. The effect is the same in both cases, but the latter view assigns the lostness of the nonelect to their own choice of sin rather than to the active decision of God, or to God’s choice by omission rather than commission” (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995] 917-18). See also the discussion of reprobation in William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols., Classic Reprint Edition (reprint of 1888 ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 1:419.

blessing upon all peoples. Both issues can affect one's theological summary of the contents and implications of the Abrahamic Covenant. Patrick Miller declared that

The critical theological place of Gen. xii 1-4a in the book of Genesis and more particularly in the Yahwistic form of the patriarchal narratives has understandably prompted a considerable amount of analysis and interpretation. Much attention has been given to explaining the syntax of the whole, especially the relation of vs. 3b to the preceding verses. The issues in understanding the syntax are not merely superficial, for the meaning of the text is to a large degree uncovered by a careful understanding of the relation of the clauses to each other.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the following translations of verse 3:

NJB:<sup>6</sup> "I shall bless those who bless you, and shall curse those who curse you, and all clans on earth will bless themselves by you."

NJPS:<sup>7</sup> "I will bless those who bless you  
And curse him that curses you;  
And all the families of the earth  
Shall bless themselves by you."

REB:<sup>8</sup> "those who bless you, I shall bless;  
those who curse you, I shall curse.  
All the peoples on earth  
will wish to be blessed as you are blessed."

KJV:<sup>9</sup> "And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."

NIV:<sup>10</sup> "I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you."

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<sup>5</sup>Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Syntax and Theology in Genesis XXII 3a," *VT* 34/4 (October 1984):472.

<sup>6</sup>NJB = *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>NJPS = *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

<sup>8</sup>REB = *The Revised English Bible* (n.p.: Oxford University and Cambridge University, 1989).

<sup>9</sup>KJV = King James Version.

<sup>10</sup>NIV = *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

NLT:<sup>11</sup> “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you.”

The same translation problem occurs again in Gen 18:18 and 28:14 with all of the translations seeking to be consistent in all references. Thus, this example helps to illustrate the fact that a translation in one passage might affect the translation of related passages. In this case, it also might affect the translation of the NT quotation of Gen 12:3 in Acts 3:25 and Gal 3:8.

Hebrew word order, syntax, and vocabulary in Gen 12:3 are central to the interpretation of the verse: **וְאֶבְרַכְהָ מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אֶאֱרָ וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְךָ כָּל מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הַהָאָדָמָה**. The word order of the first half of the verse is a chiasm in which each word or phrase is mirrored by an equivalent word or phrase in reverse order:

- A I will bless
- B those blessing you
- B' the one disdaining you
- A' I will curse

The purpose of such a structure is to emphasize the central members. In this particular case the people blessing or cursing Abraham and his descendants are highlighted. That leads naturally into the last part of the verse whose emphasis is again on people: “all the families/clans of the earth.” It is noteworthy that the first **B** element is plural while the second one is singular. This difference in number could imply that “more people will bless Abraham than will maltreat him, and that God desires to bless many and curse few.”<sup>12</sup> The chiastic structure might also be considered a convenient and natural means of breaking the chain of four cohortative verbs with *waw* (וַאֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה), “and I will make you”; וְאֶבְרַכְךָ, “and I will bless you”; וְאֶגְדָּלְךָ, “and I will magnify”; וְאֶבְרַכְהָ, “and I will bless”) and one imperative with *waw* (וְהָיָה), “and let it be”) in v. 2 following the initial imperative (הֵלֵךְ, “go”) of v. 1. The disjunctive clause (וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אֶאֱרָ, “and the one disdaining you I will curse”) serves to make this concept distinct “so that there can be no confusion between the form and the function of the clause . . . and the preceding clauses.”<sup>13</sup> The result is that the curse is made to appear as though it were not a part of Yahweh’s intention:

God commands Abraham to go out in order to receive a blessing and bring about a stream of blessing in the world. But Yahweh does not command Abraham to go out in

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<sup>11</sup>NLT = *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1996).

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament*, SBL Dissertation Series 95 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987) 33. See also Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987) 277.

<sup>13</sup>Miller, “Syntax and Theology in Genesis XII 3a” 473.

order to bring about curse.<sup>14</sup>

Miller applied this interpretation of the Hebrew syntax to a description of God's purpose in blessing Abraham and, through him, the nations: "When Yahweh sent Abram out, it was to bring about blessing, not curse. That is the good report which the Bible transmits to each generation."<sup>15</sup> Having thus related the text to a denial of the doctrine of double predestination, Miller then provides a suggested translation that would be conducive to the reader reaching the same conclusion:

- 1 And Yahweh said to Abram:  
"Go from your land, from your kindred, and from your father's house to the land which I will show you,
- 2 that I may make you a great nation, and bless you, and make your name great that you may effect blessing,
- 3 and that I may bless the ones blessing you—and should there be one who regards you with contempt I will curse him.  
So, then, all the families of the earth can gain a blessing in you."<sup>16</sup>

Another aspect of the text involves the use of two different Hebrew words for "curse" (translated in the chiasm diagram above as "disdaining" and "curse"). "Traditional English translations fail to bring out the difference between these words, usually translating both 'curse.'"<sup>17</sup> The point of the text seems to be that even if an individual treats Abraham lightly, treats him with contempt, or despises him, the judicial curse of God will be upon him.<sup>18</sup>

One element in the last half of v. 3 is responsible for the most serious variation in translation—the verb *נִבְרַח* (also employed in 18:18 and 28:14). Its form is that of the Niphal stem, which might be passive, reflexive, reciprocal, or middle in its grammatical voice.<sup>19</sup> In all four the subject of the verb is also the object of the verb (the recipient of the verb's action). The passive implies an outside agent ("they will be blessed [by someone]"), the reflexive makes the subject the agent

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 474.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 475.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 474.

<sup>17</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 276. See also Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 264.

<sup>18</sup>In and of itself, this distinction between synonyms for "curse" is theologically significant. Cf. Miller, "Syntax and Theology in Genesis XII 3a" 472-76.

<sup>19</sup>A detailed listing of the proponents of these various views is available in Michael A. Grisanti, "The Missing Mandate: Missions in the Old Testament," in *Missions in a New Millennium: Change and Challenges in World Missions*, ed. by W. Edward Glenny and William H. Smallman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000) 60-62 nn. 16-18. As for his own conclusion in the matter, Grisanti stated that his essay "makes no attempt to provide a final answer to this question. It does assume that a passive nuance is a legitimate and common option for the *Niphal* stem" (60 n. 15).

(“they will bless themselves”),<sup>20</sup> the reciprocal consists of a plural subject that normally participates in mutual action (“they will bless each other”), and the middle in which the subject is affected in some way by the action (“they will acquire blessing for themselves”). The middle voice is somewhat ambiguous because it might speak of either an outside agent (as in the passive) or the subject as agent (as in the reflexive). The question is not a minor one. It is a crucial interpretational issue. “Significant theological conclusions follow from the interpretation of these passages [Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14].”<sup>21</sup> How can the translator know which usage is involved? Only the context can reveal the usage.

Frankly, this particular context is of little help in resolving the issue. Observing this impasse, translators normally fall back on their knowledge of the rest of Scripture as well as their own theological backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> Some appeal to the alternate form of the concept in 22:18 and 26:4. In these two verses a different form of the Hebrew verb is employed: *הִתְבָּרַךְ* (Hithpael). The Hithpael is normally a reflexive, so the expected translation would be: “all the nations of the earth will bless themselves through your seed/offspring.” According to Waltke and O’Connor, the Hithpael “historically tends to take on the passive functions”<sup>23</sup> of the Niphal. In other words, both forms may express the passive sense.<sup>24</sup> However, both forms could also express the reflexive sense.<sup>25</sup> Mitchell offers strong arguments supporting the middle voice.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, however, “grammatical arguments are not decisive.”<sup>27</sup>

Does it make any difference which voice is attributed to the verb in this

<sup>20</sup>This interpretation is followed by Chisholm in his recent volume on OT exegesis (Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998] 85). Cf. also Josef Scharbert, “*בָּרַךְ*,” *TDOT* 2:296-97.

<sup>21</sup>Steven William Boyd, “A Synchronic Analysis of the Medio-Passive-Reflexive in Biblical Hebrew” (Ph.D. dissertation, The Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, 1993) 10.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., “Taking Theology Seriously in the Translation Task,” *The Bible Translator* 33/3 (July 1982):309. Arichea cites the example of a missionary translator who rejected the reflexive solely on the basis that he believed that it would support the doctrine of universalism.

<sup>23</sup>Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 395 (§23.6.4a); hereinafter referred to as *IBHS*. Waltke and O’Connor declare that “it is not surprising that the stems are occasionally confounded” (*ibid.*). This study takes issue with that conclusion for the passages under discussion.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Boyd, “A Synchronic Analysis” 11-12.

<sup>25</sup>Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 151-52.

<sup>26</sup>Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK* 31-36. Cf. also C. A. Keller, “*בָּרַךְ*,” *TLOT* 1:274: “Yet the usage of this conjugation—in contrast to the pu. and hitp.—probably emphasizes its specific meaning. It indicates an action completed on the subj., without viewing the subj. itself (hitp.) or another person (pu.) as the author of the action. . . . *brk ni.* means, then, ‘to experience blessing, participate in blessing,’ etc. . . . Gen 12:3b means, then, ‘by you shall all the families of the earth gain blessing.’” Unfortunately, the problem is ignored completely by John N. Oswalt, “*בָּרַךְ*,” *TWOT* 1:132-33.

<sup>27</sup>Michael L. Brown, “*בָּרַךְ*,” *NIDOTTE* 1:760.

case? According to Westermann, it makes no difference at all—the Abrahamic blessing still reaches all of earth's peoples.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Hamilton (“this is not a point of esoteric grammar”<sup>29</sup>), Speiser (“it is of great consequence theologically”<sup>30</sup>), and Kaiser<sup>31</sup> stress that the voice chosen is extremely significant theologically. As Michael Brown observes, “In point of fact, it is one thing to receive blessing through Abraham's seed (passive or middle sense); it is another thing to desire to be like Abraham's seed (based on the reflexive sense).”<sup>32</sup> Kaiser is quite clear in regard to the theological distinction between the reflexive and passive:

It would not be a matter of the nations looking over the fence to see what Israel had done and then, in copy-cat fashion, blessing themselves. It would be only by grace, by a gift of God—not by works. This would be the basis for God's blessing humanity in personal salvation.<sup>33</sup>

The Samaritan Pentateuch, Aramaic Targums, Latin Vulgate, and Syriac Peshitta all employ what would be best identified as a passive/middle to translate the Hebrew verb in this passage. The Greek Septuagint and the NT (cf. Acts 3:25 and Gal 3:8)<sup>34</sup> use a passive voice to translate it here.

Why would the Hithpael be employed in Gen 22:18 and 26:4? Does it possess any exegetical significance? When a reoccurring word or phrase is suddenly altered in any way, the interpreter or translator is obligated to seek a reason for the change. Although grammar alone may not determine which voice (passive, middle, reflexive, or reciprocal) is to be used in translating these five occurrences of בָּרַךְ, grammar might very well provide an answer for the question regarding the variation between Niphal and Hithpael. In the Hebrew intensive stems (Piel, Pual, and Hithpael) there is the potential for an iterative or plurative meaning.<sup>35</sup> Roots like קָבַר

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 152. Also Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 278.

<sup>29</sup>Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 374.

<sup>30</sup>E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, 2nd ed., Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978) 86.

<sup>31</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 19-20.

<sup>32</sup>Brown, “בָּרַךְ” 1:760.

<sup>33</sup>Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament* 20. The theological significance of the passive is clearly argued by Michael A. Grisanti in his doctoral dissertation: “The Relationship of Israel and the Nations in Isaiah 40–55” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1993) 296-303.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Brown, “בָּרַךְ” 1:760; Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament* 19-20.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert: A Student's Guide to the Syntax of Biblical Hebrew* (Quakertown, Pa.: Stylus, 1996) 26 (Piel, §2.1.4b), 27 (Pual, §2.1.5b). The Hithpael is basically the reflexive of the Piel, thus partaking of the various usages of that stem, including the iterative (Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. T. Muraoka, Subsidia Biblica 14/1 [Rome:



(“bury”) in the simple stems (Qal and Niphal) maintain a non-iterative or non-plurative meaning especially with singular subjects (cf. *קָבַר אֲבְרָהָם אֶת שָׂרָה*, “Abraham buried his wife Sarah,” Gen 23:19<sup>36</sup>) while taking a plurative meaning in the intensive stems with a plural object (cf. *קָבַר אֲבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ*, “Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried,” 25:10). Interestingly, the Niphal forms of *בָּרַךְ* in 12:3, 18:18, and 28:14 are all modified by the preposition *ב* with a singular pronominal suffix (2ms in 12:3 and 28:14;<sup>37</sup> 3ms in 18:18). The Hithpael forms in 22:18 and 26:4, however, are modified by the preposition *ב* with a collective noun (*זַרְעֶךָ*, “your seed/offspring”). It would appear that the plurative concept is a viable explanation for the variation in the verbs.<sup>38</sup> When the blessing emphasizes the agency of Abraham the verb is Niphal, but when the agents are the descendants of Abraham the verb is Hithpael—it implies the repetitive nature of the blessing generation after generation. This explanation would negate, to a certain degree, the argument claiming that the use of the Hithpael in 22:18 and 26:4 is driven by its reflexive meaning (which is then imposed upon the Niphal in 12:3, 18:18, and 28:14).<sup>39</sup> As Grisanti aptly concludes, no translational distinction “between the *Niphal* and *Hithpael* constructions naturally rises from the text. Consequently, they should all be translated in the same fashion.”<sup>40</sup>

Proposed translation:

I will bless those who bless you, [Abram]—  
 But, should any treat you with contempt, I will curse him.  
 [In conclusion,] all of earth’s peoples will be blessed through you.

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Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1996] §53*i*). Cf. Waltke and O’Connor, *IBHS* 426-29 (§26.1.2), for a fuller discussion of the iterative meaning for Hithpael.

<sup>36</sup>The Qal stem for *קָבַר* is utilized throughout Gen 23.

<sup>37</sup>In 28:14 the object of a second *ב*-phrase is the collective *זַרְעֶךָ* (“your seed/offspring”). The second phrase is delayed in the sentence, coming after the object of the verb.

<sup>38</sup>Although this distinction in the patriarchal blessing formula is consistent within the Pentateuch (the Hithpael form of *בָּרַךְ* in Deut 29:18 is not a use of this formula), the two occurrences of the formula outside the Pentateuch (Jer 4:2 and Ps 72:17) involve the Hithpael with a 3ms pronominal suffix on *ב*. These later adaptations of the patriarchal blessing include several significant variations of the earlier original formula (cf. Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK* 55-57, 72-73, 94, 103). Mitchell notes the distinctive employment of the Hithpael with *זַרְעֶךָ* (ibid., 55-56), but does not mention any association with an iterative or plurative meaning for the verb. John H. Sailhamer (“Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990] 1:114), also concludes that the key is the iterative of the Hithpael employed with the nominal object (as compared to the pronominal object accompanying the Niphal): “the Hithpael [can be read] as iterative when the promise is envisioned with respect to the future ‘seed’—the blessing will continue (iterative) to be offered to the nations through the seed of Abraham” (ibid.).

<sup>39</sup>Contra Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition* 85; Scharbert, “*בָּרַךְ*,” *TDOT* 2:296-97.

<sup>40</sup>Grisanti, “The Missing Mandate” 49.

**Genesis 15:15**

The translation of a phrase in its first occurrence might set the tone for all subsequent occurrences of the phrase or phrases similar to it. Translators sometimes discover that the interpretation which guided them in the first occurrence does not hold up under scrutiny in other contexts. Yahweh's declaration to Abram in Genesis 15:15 consists of a parallelism that would seem to be synonymous:<sup>41</sup>

NASB:<sup>42</sup> "And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age."

NJPS: "As for you,  
You shall go to your fathers in peace;  
You shall be buried at a ripe old age."

NRSV:<sup>43</sup> "As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age."

REB: "You yourself will join your forefathers in peace and be buried at a ripe old age."

NLT: "But you will die in peace, at a ripe old age."

The concept *תָּבֹנָא אֶלְאָבְתֵיךָ* ("you shall go to your fathers") is to be found also in the phrase "be gathered to his people" (*יָצִיטְא לְעַמֵּי*); cf. 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:29-33; Num 20:24, 26; 27:13; 31:2; Deut 31:16; 32:50). It is often treated as an idiom or a mere "euphemism for death without clear theological import."<sup>44</sup> Among various scholars there are three different views concerning these phrases: (1) they indicate a belief in immortality,<sup>45</sup> (2) they have no theological connotations and

<sup>41</sup>Cf. also 2 Kgs 22:20 / 2 Chr 34:28.

<sup>42</sup>NASB = *New American Standard Bible* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, 1973).

<sup>43</sup>NRSV = *New Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

<sup>44</sup>Charles L. Feinberg, "יָצִיטְא," *TWOT* 1:60.

<sup>45</sup>An impressive array of scholars (some of them not so evangelical) hold this position: Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 2:872-73; Robert G. Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, vol. 6A of *AB* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975) 72; A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, International Theological Library (reprint of 1904 ed., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961) 500; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books/Zondervan, 1978) 99; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 3 vols., trans. James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 1:263; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1973) 150, 212; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 2 vols. (reprint of 1942 ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 1:485-86, 2:694-95; Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. George E. Day (reprint of 1883 ed. by Funk & Wagnalls,

are mere euphemisms,<sup>46</sup> and (3) they indicate the practice of multiple burial.<sup>47</sup>

Out of the translations quoted above, only NLT employs a rendering that would indicate a euphemistic interpretation (“you will die”). A number of arguments may be made for the immortality view: (1) Abraham had no “fathers” (Gen 15:15) in his grave—only his wife, Sarah (25:8-10). (2) Jacob had no people in Egypt with whom to be buried and had no tomb, yet he “breathed his last, and was gathered to his people” (49:33; cf. v. 29). (3) Aaron was buried alone on Mount Hor near the Edomite border, yet Yahweh said, “Aaron shall be gathered to his people” (Num 20:24).<sup>48</sup> (4) Yahweh also told Moses that he would “be gathered” to his people (Num 27:13), but he was buried in an unidentifiable grave site (Deut 34:6). His body was also a matter of dispute between Satan and Michael (Jude 9).<sup>49</sup> (5) The patriarchs did possess a concept of immortality and a belief that God could resurrect them from the dead (cf. Job 19:25-27; Heb 11:17-19). This was consistent with God referring to Himself as the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (cf. Exod 3:6; Mark

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Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978) 170; James Orr, “Immortality in the Old Testament,” in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 255; Richard D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, “1, 2 Kings,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebel (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 4:284; Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1981) 153; Kyle M. Yates, “Genesis,” in *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1962) 30. In the Berkeley version the translation footnote to Num 20:24 reads, “An intimation of life after death.” The Berkeley translation team included Gleason Archer, S. Lewis Johnson, William Sanford LaSor, J. Barton Payne, Samuel J. Schultz, Merrill F. Unger, Leon J. Wood, and Martin J. Wyngaarden. Though it is virtually certain that there may have been differences of opinion among the translators, the footnote remains.

<sup>46</sup>Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 2:213; Feinberg, “**יָצַק**,” *TWOT* 1:60; Judah J. Slotki, “Judges,” in *Joshua-Judges*, ed. A. Cohen, rev. A. J. Rosenberg (London: Soncino, 1987) 170.

<sup>47</sup>John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 88; Eric M. Meyers, “Secondary Burials in Palestine,” *BA* 33/1 (Feb 1970):2-29. Cf. I. Cornelius, Andrew E. Hill, and Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., “**יָצַק**,” *NIDOTTE* 1:470, and Slotki, “Judges” 170.

<sup>48</sup>In a recent work on patriarchal religion, Pagolu concurs: “[T]he desire for a proper burial, the desire to be buried in the family grave and the stereotyped phrase ‘gathered to his people’ suggest some belief in the afterlife. Moreover, this formula is used only for the patriarchs and for Moses and Aaron. It could not have meant burial in the family grave since this is mentioned after the record of death and before burial in the case of the patriarchs, except that for Jacob ‘died’ and for Ishmael ‘buried’ is omitted; and in any case it cannot be applied to Moses and Aaron as they were not buried in their family grave” (Augustine Pagolu, *The Religion of the Patriarchs*, JSOTSS 277 [Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 1998] 80). Cf. P. S. Johnston, “The Underworld and the Dead in the Old Testament” (PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 1993) 90.

<sup>49</sup>Eichrodt’s counter-argument that the terminology had already become generalized and euphemistic by the time of Abraham (*Theology of the Old Testament* 2:213) is conjectural.

12:18-27).<sup>50</sup>

Regardless of the interpretation of such phraseology taken by the Bible translator, it would be the better part of wisdom to avoid employing the NLT's reduction of the phrase. With so many evangelical scholars defending the literality of the phrase and the implications for the OT doctrine of life after death, it would be better to translate the text literally and leave the debate to the commentators and theologians. Perhaps this is one example to which Arichea's warning might apply:

One should guard against some rather particularistic views, that is, views held only by one or two scholars. Often such views present the eccentricities of scholars rather than serious contributions to the interpretation of a text.<sup>51</sup>

Leaving the text as it is does no damage to any of the interpretive views. NLT's translation purposefully excludes other views, including the majority evangelical interpretation.

Proposed translation:

But as for you, you will go to your ancestors in peace; you will be buried at a ripe old age.

#### **Genesis 19:24**

Unfortunately, translation can obscure theological details. An example of that kind of problem is to be found in Gen 19:24. The Hebrew text has **וַיִּהְיֶה** **עַל־סְדֹם וְעַל־עֲמֹרָה גְפְרִית נֹאֵשׁ מֵאֵת יְהוָה הַשָּׁמַיִם** ("Then Yahweh rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah sulfurous fire from Yahweh, from the heavens"). By placing **וַיִּהְיֶה** at the head of the clause, the author emphasized "Yahweh's" role in the event. As Ross puts it, "The text . . . simply emphasizes that, whatever means were used, it was the Lord who rained this judgment on them."<sup>52</sup> While this is an accurate observation, it is only one part of the overall meaning of this clause. There is a second occurrence of **וַיִּהְיֶה** later in the verse: **מֵאֵת יְהוָה** ("from Yahweh"). Is it a redundant expression in order to extend the emphasis of the first word, or is it the result of Moses' careful attention to a theological detail? Notice what some translations have done with this second reference to Yahweh:

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<sup>50</sup>Cf. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 99. For a taste of the debate involved with this OT quotation in the NT, see Richard T. Mead, "A Dissenting Opinion about Respect for Context in Old Testament Quotations," in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 153-63 (esp. 160). It would be precarious theologically to explain away a patriarchal belief in immortality on the basis that Jesus employed midrashic interpretation allowing Him to quote the OT out of context or that the early church put these words in His mouth.

<sup>51</sup>Arichea, "Taking Theology Seriously in the Translation Task" 316.

<sup>52</sup>Ross, *Creation and Blessing* 362.

- NJPS: “the LORD rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from the LORD out of heaven”
- NIV: “Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens.”
- KJV: “Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven.”
- REB: “and the LORD rained down fire and brimstone from the skies on Sodom and Gomorrah”
- NLT: “Then the LORD rained down fire and burning sulfur from the heavens on Sodom and Gomorrah.”
- NJB: “Then Yahweh rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire of his own sending.”

There are three variations among translations of this verse:

“brimstone and fire” / “fire and brimstone” / “fire and burning sulfur” / “burning sulfur” / “sulfurous fire”  
 “heavens” / “heaven” / “skies”  
 “from the LORD out of heaven” / “from the heavens” / “of his own sending”

The first of these variations involves the possibility of a nominal hendiadys wherein the first noun of a pair “modifies the second, so that their translation often sounds like a noun with an adjective.”<sup>53</sup> KJV’s and NJB’s “brimstone and fire” is a very literal rendering. REB’s “fire and brimstone” reorders the two terms to match the normal English idiom. NLT also reorders the terms, but avoids depicting chunks of sulfur falling from the skies by saying that it is “burning sulfur.” A similar concept is conveyed by NIV’s use of only “burning sulfur” in an attempt to translate the two nouns as a nominal hendiadys. However, such a translation is not in accord with the principle of Hebrew grammar by which the first term should describe the second, not the reverse. Therefore, the most faithful treatment of the two nouns as a hendiadys is the translation of NJPS: “sulfurous fire.”<sup>54</sup>

The second set of variations reveals the interpretive decision the translators made regarding the meaning of  $\text{דָּבָרֵי שׁוֹפָר}$ . NIV and NLT opted to translate the Hebrew form very literally and leave the actual meaning up to the readers to determine for

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<sup>53</sup>Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert* 22 (§1.8.3a).

<sup>54</sup>Cf. also Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 45, 47.

themselves. "Heavens" could mean either the sky or the celestial abode of God. REB opted to specify that it was only the "skies" that were intended. Both NJPS and KJV decided to use "heaven" as a way of indicating their preference for the interpretation that Yahweh sent the judgment from His own residence.<sup>55</sup> NJB's translation would also imply that the reference is to the divine residence since it is taken as representative of the Lord Himself.

The third variation in this text is the one under examination. REB, NLT, and NJB chose to eliminate the second reference to Yahweh as being a redundant expression. In his commentary on Genesis, Gordon Wenham opts for a similar conclusion but for different reasons. He believes that the "narrator stresses that 'it was from the LORD.'" <sup>56</sup> These translations have obscured the presence of two different persons of the Godhead. If the expression were an intentional redundancy, one would expect to see it used elsewhere in the OT. However, it does not occur elsewhere. This is a unique expression that is clarified by later revelation. The OT reveals that in a number of cases the "Angel" or "Messenger of the LORD" was the immediate agent of judgment (cf. 2 Sam 24:16-17; 2 Kgs 19:35; Ps 35:6-7).<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it is no surprise to the theologian that the same arrangement for judgment might apply in the matter of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Such a verse as Gen 19:24 would hit at the heart of the aberrant theology of cultic groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses. This text speaks of two persons with the title of Yahweh/Jehovah: one in heaven above and one with a presence nearer to or upon the earth. This is the opinion of a number of theologians. Augustus Hopkins Strong places this text alongside Hos 1:7 and 2 Tim 1:18 as examples of passages in which "Jehovah distinguishes himself from Jehovah."<sup>58</sup> James Borland points to the same distinction of persons in Gen 19:24.<sup>59</sup> Victor Hamilton argues that

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<sup>55</sup>Eichrodt appealed to passages like Gen 19:24 as proof of an early belief that God's dwelling-place is in heaven (*Theology of the Old Testament* 2:190).

<sup>56</sup>Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol 2 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1994) 59. Therefore, Wenham translates the verse as follows: "and the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah: it was from the LORD from the sky" (ibid., 35). This is a legitimate attempt to translate the text as it stands. It takes into account the Masoretic accents dividing the verse. However, the treatment of this final portion of the verse as a noun clause (viz., *it was*) lacks convincing grammatical evidence. Instead, it would be more natural grammatically to take these last two phrases as adverbial prepositional phrases modifying the main verb, "rained."

<sup>57</sup>See also, Meredith G. Kline, "The Feast of Cover-Over," *JETS* 37/4 (December 1994):498.

<sup>58</sup>Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students*, 3 vols. in 1 (reprint of 1907 ed., Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1967) 318.

<sup>59</sup>James A. Borland, *Christ in the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999) 152. Others who note this same distinction in the text include David L. Cooper, *The God of Israel*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1945) 23; Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* 133. Oehler granted that some sort of distinction was being made in Gen 19:24 but did not think that, in and of itself, it supported the view of identifying the one manifestation directly with the Logos, the Son of God, the second person of the Godhead.

the phraseology is not to be “dismissed as a doublet or a gloss.”<sup>60</sup> However, in so doing, he stops short of mentioning any distinction between divine persons in the passage.

Does this mean that the translators of REB, NLT and NJB are anti-trinitarian? Absolutely not. A theologically insensitive translation does not tell the reader anything about the theological position of the translators. All that the translation indicates is that such a particular theological topic was not significantly clear to the translators in this one passage. When evaluating a Bible translation, it is irresponsible to stigmatize the translators with a particular theological error or heresy solely on the basis of a single passage’s translation. For example, the RSV’s translation of Isaiah 7:14 (“a young woman”) does not indicate that the translators took a theological position denying the virgin conception of Jesus Christ. Likewise, the ASV’s “every scripture inspired of God” in 2 Tim 3:16 is no proof that the translators held to a view claiming that only some of the Scriptures are inspired.

Do such translations weaken the evidence supporting a particular doctrine? Yes, but that is not the same as denial of that doctrine. Those doctrines to which readers ought to adhere usually receive support in a number of passages throughout the Bible. It must be remembered that even

though the fruit of prejudice may be evident in a translation, it rarely affects the reader’s broad conclusions about doctrine when doctrinal matters are studied in the broad scope of a whole translation. It may mislead him regarding a detail on a few occasions, but in almost every case he can formulate teachings that are generally sound.<sup>61</sup>

Any doctrine that relies upon a single text of Scripture is probably not a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith. If that one text is problematic, it is unwise to base a doctrine or practice upon it (e.g., snake handling on the basis of the disputed final verses of the Gospel of Mark).

Proposed translation:

Then Yahweh rained sulfurous fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah from Yahweh in heaven.

or,

Then Yahweh rained sulfurous fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah from Yahweh—from heaven itself.

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<sup>60</sup>Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50* 46. Westermann is representative of those who think that the repetitive reference to Yahweh is awkward and due to a merging of two different accounts (*Genesis 12–36* 306).

<sup>61</sup>Robert L. Thomas, *How to Choose a Bible Version: An Introductory Guide to English Translations* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor/Christian Focus, 2000) 103.

### Conclusion

Bible translators must approach every passage of Scripture with reverence and careful attention to detail. They must not make the text say something that the original author did not intend for it to mean. Translators must not add meaning, nor must they subtract any of the meaning. The goal should be to translate the text into its receptor language accurately and fully. Since the Scriptures ought to be the sole source of theology, their translation is vitally wedded to theologizing. Translation affects theology just as much as theology can affect translation. The translator must be keenly aware of the interaction of the two disciplines.<sup>62</sup>

The example of Gen 12:3 revealed how the Hebrew text's theological implications are not fully exposed by any translation. It is as though the various translators pursued their task unaware of the significance of the text. Some commentators, linguists, and theologians have recognized one or two of the issues, but none of them has dealt with all of the issues. Translators dependent upon such resources are not helped in their difficult task by the absence of full discussion for such theologically laden passages. This text also demonstrated how important Hebrew syntax is to the exegesis, theology, and translation of the Hebrew. Bible translators need to pursue a high degree of facility in the biblical languages as well as a full study of theology (biblical, systematic, and historical).

The second text, Gen 15:15, presented an opportunity to see the interaction of archaeology with interpretation—multiple burials in family tombs have caused some to turn an ancient phrase into an old euphemism. The matter is not so readily settled, however, when various contexts are taken into account and the NT testimony is also consulted. Perhaps the translator of such a debated text should avoid locking the translation into a minority viewpoint. No doctrine should be based upon a questionable text. Likewise, the translator of a debated text should not employ a questionable translation to push a minority theological agenda. On the other hand, a time might come when such a general rule should be violated in order to protect the integrity of the biblical text and its teachings. Such a move, however, should not be made without much exegesis, thought, counsel, and prayer.

The final passage, Gen 19:24, illustrated the way in which translations can obscure key theological details. It was also a useful springboard to discuss the pitfalls of appealing to what might be perceived as a translational error or indiscretion in order to impugn the theological position of the translators. One translational decision in one text does not make one a heretic. Robert Thomas wisely cautions the readers of Bible versions with the following words:

The words of the translation are, after all is said and done, the heart of the issue. From

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<sup>62</sup>Cf. Arichea, "Taking Theology Seriously in the Translation Task" 309-16; and a brief response to Arichea's article: Michel Bulcke, "Note: The Translator's Theology," *The Bible Translator* 35/1 (January 1984):134-35. Arichea discusses three factors: "(1) unjustified theologizing by the translator; (2) making translational decisions in the light of one's own theology, and (3) insufficient exegetical follow-through" (Arichea, "Taking Theology Seriously in the Translation Task" 309).



them the reader can derive a variety of insights about the doctrinal preferences of translators. He must be cautious, however, in drawing conclusions from this type of resource, because sometimes a translator may conform to a given doctrinal pattern unconsciously. He may choose a rendering without realizing its theological implications. All translators are not theologians, so they cannot always foresee the nuances of meaning conveyed by various English expressions.<sup>63</sup>

Evangelicals with a high regard for the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures should take the lead in Bible translation projects around the world. May God lead more men into the vital work of Bible translation—men highly trained in both the biblical languages and theology. All Bible translators ought to be theologians.

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<sup>63</sup>Thomas, *How to Choose a Bible Version* 105.