

# How close are we to the Bible?

## The theological basis for evaluating translations

The arrival of the new English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV) has brought to the surface many underlying issues about our English language Bibles, and what we should expect from them. A mass of questions arise.

How literal should a translation be? Is it possible to exactly reproduce into English the ancient Greek and Hebrew of the Bible? And even if we could do that, what if that translation was so difficult that most people couldn't read it? Would that be a 'good' translation? How simple should we try to make the Bible? Are the difficulties involved in rendering a 2000 year-old text into modern English so severe that we really have to 're-write' the Bible to make it relevant and understandable to modern people?

These questions are by no means simple. They take us into the murky waters of the theory of language and meaning, and how God communicates with us, and us with each other. Rest assured, I will not try to solve all these imponderables in this paper.

What I will do is look at one fundamental issue that lies behind much of the modern debate about translation, and that is: *How close are we to the world of the biblical text?*

In other words, is it a relatively simple thing for us to gain access to the meaning of the biblical text as 21st century people? Or is the linguistic, historical and cultural distance that separates us from the 1st century so vast that translating the Bible into a form that we can understand is quite a difficult task? Are we close to the people of the 1st century or distant from them? Are we in a profound sense united with them or divided from them?

Our answer to this question will determine our basic approach to Bible translation, and indeed our approach to Bible reading and preaching, as will become apparent below.

## The unity of all humanity

According to the biblical world view, all humans have a great deal in common with each other because of the twin doctrines of creation and redemption.

*The doctrine of creation* tells us that God created the world as a good, orderly, habitable place in which humans could live, work and prosper. The created order has certain abiding features and structures that are givens, because God put them in place. There are certain things in our world which are 'good' because God made them to be 'good', and likewise certain things which are undesirable and 'evil'. There are relational structures—such as 'man' and 'woman' and 'marriage'—which are created by God for humanity's good. In God's world there is work and love and human relations and rest and beauty and sex and language, and much more.

The human capacity for language is worth noting in particular, and is important for our understanding of Bible translation. God created us to be like him in being able to speak, in being able to name things. He gave our minds the

capacity to think about the world conceptually, and the ability to represent those conceptions to one another through speech, and writing.

More than this, because the created world (including ourselves) has an order and a rationale, we can share perceptions of the world, and so understand one another. Because the world is an orderly place, created by God to be that way, we can understand it, name it and talk about it.

In other words, the created order is the 'playing field' upon which all human history has been played out. And it is a moral playing field as well as a physical one. What is right and good and beneficial in the creation is so because of God's creative purposes; it is part of the order he has put in place.

This means that all of humanity—in all places and at all times in history—has something very profound in common. We all live and work and love and exist on the same creational playing field. Adultery is wrong and harmful because it distorts and damages the order of relationship (called 'marriage') that God has created. It is wrong in Egypt in 1500 BC and it is wrong in China in 2002 AD. Laziness is wrong and harmful in Israel in 800 BC, just as it is in Australia in 2002 AD, because it goes against the created structures of the world (such that humans should gain their bread by working for it, and should be loving towards others by not being a burden on them).

But that, as they say, is not all. *The doctrine of redemption* adds an important element to the fellowship of all humanity. We not only all exist on the same playing field, with its structures and boundaries and norms; we are also all playing in the same game. Human history is linear and purposeful. It has a beginning and an end and a rationale—and that rationale is the plan of God to unite all things in heaven and on earth under one head, even Christ (as Eph 1 puts it). God's cosmic plan to make Jesus Christ the Lord of a redeemed people in a new creation is the 'game' that we're all part of. And as of now we are deep into the second half, with not much time left on the clock, and the result a foregone conclusion (the victory having already been sewn up not long after half time).

All of human history bears a relation to this plan, and gains its significance from it. We understand the history of Old Testament Israel, for example, not just in terms of them being fellow human beings living in the same world as us, but also in terms of their place in God's unfolding purposes. This is why some things that were appropriate to them may no longer be appropriate for us. We're on the same playing field, but we're operating at a different time in the game.

Even so, it is the same game, the same plan, the same unfolding purpose of God. The biblical writers assumed this. When Jesus quoted Scripture to the Sadducees, he said, "Have you not read what was said *to you* by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'" (Matt 22:31). Jesus assumed that what God said to Moses (recorded in Exod 3:6) also directly addressed the Sadducees, some 1300 years later. The fact that more than a millennia has passed, and that cultural, historical and linguistic changes had taken place, did not alter the fact that what God had said back then to Moses was still utterly true and relevant to the 1st century Sadducees.

We will return to this subject further below but for now let us note what fundamentally unites humanity: we all live and exist on the same playing field (creation), and are part of the same game (redemption).

## The division of all humanity

The Bible is also quite clear as to the source of the divisions that exist within humanity. Put simply, the problem is sin. The entrance of sin into the world destroyed the harmony of Adam and Eve, not only with God, but with each other. Before long, brother murdered brother, and the enmity and hostility of humanity towards each other was established as an incorrigible problem.

At this basic level we are divided from each other because of the selfishness and sinfulness of our hearts.

At another level, however, we are divided from each other because God determined that we should be. At the tower of Babel, humanity banded together to make a name for themselves, but God had other ideas. In confusing their languages, God frustrated the ability of humans to cooperate together in opposition to God. The capacity for language was still there, and our ability to describe the world, and to relate to other people was still there. But in the confusion of our languages, a barrier was erected that prevented us from completely understanding each other and cooperating together to shake our collective fist at God.

It is important to note, however, that even this division within humanity took place on the one playing field (of creation), and was in fact part of God's redemptive game plan. His purpose was to separate the people's of the earth, and to choose one of them (Israel) through whom to bless and redeem them all. As Acts 17 makes clear, God's division of humanity into different nations, to live in different places, was all part of his ultimate plan—which culminated in Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul could stand up in the Areopagus and proclaim that God's purposes as Creator and Redeemer were utterly relevant and pressing for a bunch of cosmopolitan, first century Greek philosophers. The God who made heaven and earth was now calling on all people everywhere—regardless of their language and culture—to repent, and submit to the Lordship of the resurrected Jesus Christ.

And one day, as the vision of Revelation tells us, a great multitude from every nation and every tongue will once again be as one, worshipping together before the throne.

## What does all this mean for Bible translation?

The above may seem very 'big picture', but it has very direct and important implications for Bible translation.

### a. Translation is worth doing

Bible translation is worth doing, because what God has said will be both understandable and relevant to all of humanity. Since we are all on the same playing field, and part of the same game, and since God created that field with all its structures and rules, and is totally in charge of the progress of the game, then what God says (about the field, and about how we are to play the game) will be true, clear and relevant to all humanity in all places and at all times in history.

The traditional name for this idea is the 'perspicuity of Scripture'—that is, that Scripture will be clear and readily understandable by the person who, through

God's Spirit, humbly seeks to hear and obey. This latter qualification is important, because the problems that do occur in our understanding of what God says are not due to his ability to communicate, nor to the relevance of his communication, but due to our dullness of heart, our distorted rationality, the confused and false ideas we've adopted, and our general rebelliousness against him.

### **b. Translation is treason**

The second implication is that no translation between two languages will be perfect. As the Italian saying goes, 'translation is treason'. Because of Babel, we do speak different languages and live in different places, with different habits of dress and customs. These surface differences mean that we will struggle to exactly represent the words of one language into another, and will never do so with complete accuracy and perfection. No Bible translation will be perfect, including the NIV, the new ESV or the venerable KJV. There will always be imperfections and glitches.

All the same, because the underlying structures of the world are the same—that is, we are all on the same playing field playing the same game—translation will be possible. Because of the perspicuity of Scripture, we will expect God's communication addressed at a particular time to a particular cultural setting to speak clearly to our own (the human capacity for language being one of the ground rules of the 'game').

### **c. The modern rejection of the biblical view**

We need to recognise that, since the Enlightenment, modern thought has fundamentally rejected the doctrines of creation and redemption as outlined above. This has yielded enormous problems in seeking to find a solid theoretical basis for knowledge, language and morality, to name just three. Without an underlying creational order to the world, and without an over-arching plan that makes sense of human history, modern thought is left largely with fragmentation, uncertainty and ultimately relativism. In terms of human nature, culture and history, there is no playing field, no rules and no game. There is just a vast expanse of grass, with no boundaries, upon which a multitude of different groups are doing their own cultural thing, without any necessary connection between them.

Of the many implications that flow from this Enlightenment view, the one that most concerns us is the enormous distance that is put between us as 21st century Westerners, and the Bible, written thousands of years ago in the Middle East. On the wide, boundary-less expanse that is the modern view of the world, we are so separated—by time, by cultural habit, by thought-pattern, by moral sensibility, by language, by technology—that it is difficult indeed to imagine how the Bible might speak clearly and relevantly to the 21st century person. This is because, according to this view, *there is nothing in principle to connect us*.

### **d. The influence of the Enlightenment view on Bible translation and reading**

As is so often and so sadly the case, Christians have been much influenced by the Enlightenment world view that has dominated Western thought over the last hundred years. We have come to accept the presupposition that there is indeed a

vast chasm that separates us from the ancient world. Many books on Bible reading, interpretation, preaching and hermeneutics simply assume this to be the case.

It is also seen in our approach to Bible translating. Many modern Bible translators now do their work on the assumption (consciously held or otherwise) that a fairly plain rendering of the ancient text into English will not bridge the cultural and historical chasm that separates us from the world of the Bible. We must do more than simply give readers access to the ancient text, through translating it into the lexical and grammatical structures of our own language. It is too distant, too strange. Instead, we must simplify and re-model the ancient text so that it can communicate within the very different world in which we now live. We must 'modernise' the text.

There are connections here with the dynamic (or functional) equivalence theory of translation, although we do not have space to examine this theory in any detail. It may be sufficient to say that the drive within modern Bible translation is to conform the ancient text to the modern world, and this includes the attempt (which is at the heart of functional equivalence theory) to reproduce the same effect within the modern reader as the original reader experienced. This seems a problematic exercise, not only in view of the theological principles outlined above, but also because of a fundamental problem—we do not have any access to the ancient reader to know how he or she reacted, or what effect the text had upon them.

## The key question in Bible translating

If what we have outlined above is accurate, then the goal of Bible translation should be this: *to give the reader as much access to the ancient text as the reader's linguistic skills will allow.*

Notice that the direction of this movement is from the reader to the ancient text, and not vice versa. If we assume, on the basis of the doctrines of creation and redemption, that the words of the Bible will speak clearly and directly to us, because we are on the same 'playing field', and playing in the same 'game', then what is required is for us to gain linguistic access to the ancient text. We do not need a cultural or historical mediator to stand between us and the text to transform the text into something more modern that we can relate to and understand. We do not, in other words, need to bring the ancient text to the modern reader, to make it more familiar, more like ourselves (because it is so strange and distant). We simply need the linguistic tools to read what Paul, Moses, Luke and all the rest, wrote.

The best way to do this, obviously, is to learn the original languages, and it is important that some of us continue to do so. However, given that it is impractical to expect all to do so, the work of translation should focus on giving the intended readers as much access to the text itself as the readers' skills will allow.

Thus, if the intended readership of the translation is children under the age of seven, then there will be a great many features of the ancient text that their linguistic and intellectual abilities will not be equipped to handle. The resulting English translation will therefore deny these young readers access to many features of the text, and it cannot be otherwise. The translation will be greatly

simplified and shortened. In fact, it will be a modern re-telling of the message and story of the text, that preserves very few features of the original at all.

In other words, there will always need to be a range of English translations available corresponding to the different linguistic abilities of different readers. The translation that is suitable for an average literate adult will not usually work for children, for teenagers, for adults with very poor literacy skills or for whom English is a second language, or perhaps even for non-Christians to whom we may want to introduce the message of the Bible in a more familiar and accessible form.

The goal, however, is to give the reader as much access to the text as their abilities will allow; to preserve as many features of the ancient text as possible, while using the grammar and syntax of the target language. The aim should be to maintain the logical structure of sentences, the connections between words, the distinctive imagery that the text uses, and so on.

It must be said that an increasing number of modern English translations do not see this as their priority. The goal, instead, seems to be to make the translation as simple as possible, and as modern as possible—to drag the ancient text into the modern world, as it were; to update its expression, even its thought-forms and referents. This trend proceeds under the unspoken assumption of the ‘chasm’ which we have discussed above. It seeks to conform the ancient text to the expectations and world of the modern reader in a number of ways:

- by chopping up longer biblical sentences into shorter English ones, without always preserving the logical connections between the ideas, presumably on the assumption that, unlike the ancient average reader, the modern average reader can't always cope with longer sentences;
- by seeking to produce in the modern reader the same spiritual effect as the ancient text produced, even though the concepts and referents which produce that effect might be different (this is related to the theory of ‘functional equivalence’);
- by removing or downplaying word play and repetition;
- by removing or recasting imagery and metaphors;
- by simplifying difficult arguments, and smoothing over ambiguities, on the assumption that the modern reader will only be confused by them;
- by completely recasting or paraphrasing the sentences to express what the translator takes to be their meaning, but using different or additional concepts and referents to do so (as in the case of the very paraphrastic translations such as ‘The Message’ or ‘The Living Bible’).

Let me reiterate that all of these steps may be quite right and necessary, if the linguistic abilities of the intended readers require it. The Good News Bible, for example, does nearly all of these things, and in doing so has produced an excellent translation for young readers and those with poor English.

However, if the linguistic abilities of the reader do not require it, then these sorts of translation decisions are unnecessary and unhelpful, because they needlessly deny the reader access in various ways to the ancient text. This sort of translation will be easier to read, because it is more modern, more familiar, more in style like the newspaper we read in the morning. But it will not thereby be better. It will not more effectively bring us to God and what he is saying to us.

By contrast, the approach that seeks to give the modern reader as much access as possible to the ancient text achieves two somewhat paradoxical things:

- It brings us, firstly, to a world we recognise as our own, a world that is real because of the very particulars that comprise it. These particulars may be slightly different from our own (e.g. tunics rather than shirts, reclining at table rather than sitting at table), yet they are all the more recognisably real for being so. It is not an idealised, ahistorical world, a universalised world, but the real world that we share, the world of dusty roads, and grassy hills, of tax and war and adultery and suffering.
- Secondly, and following on from this, it allows to hear the challenge from outside that God brings to us by addressing us in the real world. The uniqueness of the Bible is not found in its historical detail and cultural setting; it is found in its divine authorship. Through it, God speaks the truth to his creatures about life on his 'playing field' and in his 'game'.

## The NIV and the ESV

How does all this apply to the current discussion about Bible translations, and in particular the new ESV? Several points should be made.

*Firstly*, it is obvious that in comparing the NIV with the ESV, we are comparing two translations that give different levels of access to the ancient text. Of the two, the NIV is the more 'modern' Bible. It repeatedly smoothes out features of the ancient text that the translators feel modern readers won't relate to or understand. There are many such examples, the most well-known being the shortening of the longer biblical sentences into shorter English sentences, and the consequent removal of logically connective elements in the sentences (such as conjunctions and participles). For example, of the 144 occurrences of the conjunction *gar* in Romans, the NIV leaves 50 untranslated (the other occurrences it translates with words like 'for', 'because', and 'so'). This is a very large number of connectives to leave out.

The NIV also tends to iron out ambiguities in the text, remove wordplay and repetition (in the interests of more stylish English), and replace the concrete metaphors so beloved of the biblical writers with more abstract modern expressions.

We should note, *secondly*, that these features of the NIV are not necessarily bad things, depending on the linguistic ability of the readers for whom it is intended, and the circumstances in which it might be used. For some English readers, the level of access the NIV grants them to the ancient text will be as much as their literary and intellectual abilities will allow. For some congregations, for some fellowships, for some age-groups, the NIV may be the best choice.

*Thirdly*, we should recognise that this trend in the NIV is not nearly as extreme as it is in many other modern translations. The NIV is by no means at the far end of the spectrum, and indeed the reason that it has been adopted so enthusiastically over the past 20 years throughout the English-speaking world is that it is so readable and fresh while offering readers more access to the original text than many other contemporary translations.

*Fourthly*, however, we should also realise that this relative lack of access to features of the ancient text is what has frustrated a growing number of readers with the NIV. Given that the you thought I could cope with 94 of the *gars* in Romans, the reader may ask, why deny me access to the other 50? Why not let me see that they are there, and think about what their significance may be?

If the text of Ephesians repeatedly uses the concrete metaphor of 'walk' to refer to the Christian journey, why not let the modern reader see that (in Eph 2:2,10; 4:1; 5:2,8,15)? If the phrase 'righteousness of God' is somewhat ambiguous in Romans 1:17, why not leave it that way rather than making the decision for the reader (by translating it 'righteousness *from* God', as the NIV does)?

In other words, there are numerous features of the biblical text which modern English is well able to represent but which the NIV fails to represent, in the interests of making the translation punchier, simpler and more 'modern'.

*Fifthly*, and finally, this is precisely what is attracting a growing number of readers to the new English Standard Version (ESV), to be their standard all-purpose Bible. The ESV manages to give the English reader substantially more access to the ancient text than the NIV, while still being eminently readable in English. The English of the ESV is not impenetrable or difficult—it is flowing and readily understandable—and yet it leaves an impressive number of features in the original intact. The connectives are still there, the participles are still there, the consistency of word use, the ambiguity that is present in some texts, the concrete imagery—they are all there to a much greater extent.

This, of course, is not to say that the ESV is perfect or not in need of further improvement; nor that other translations are not useful in different contexts. But for the Bible that will be our public reference point, the Bible we will study and preach from and memorise, the ESV has a great deal to commend it. It grants us more access to the ancient than the NIV, and yet does not stretch the linguistic skills of the average reader beyond their ability (which is the problem with even more literal translations such as the NASB).

The appeal of the ESV is ultimately a theological one. For it seems to be based more closely on the theological principles that the Bible contains—that God created both the world and our language, and that the Scriptures are thus perspicuous, not only to the original readers, but to us.

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