A Primer on Bible Translations
Part Four
By David F. Sims

In Nehemiah 8, Ezra the scribe brought the book of the Law of Moses to read it aloud to the people in Jerusalem. Those who spoke the original Hebrew language were able to listen with understanding. But for those who did not speak Hebrew (they had been in captivity for many years in a foreign land), the Levites provided translation. Nehemiah 8:8 says, "They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the meaning." The people responded to what they heard: they understood it, believed it and they repented.

In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the 12 Apostles, and they preached the Gospel in the languages of all those who were present, so that people from many nations each heard and understood in their own native tongues. The result was, according to Acts 2:37, that many of them believed the message, were repentant of their error, and asked, "what shall we do?"

Acts 8:27-35, the Ethiopian Eunuch was reading from a Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the book of Isaiah. Philip the evangelist approached and explained it to him, with the result that the Eunuch wanted to be baptized.

Jesus and the Apostles spoke Aramaic but quoted from the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. The proof of this is evident when you compare prophecies in the Old Testament to their quoted fulfillment in the New Testament, wherein you will see minor variations, caused by translational differences. The Apostles and prophets who penned the original writings of the New Testament wrote in Greek; specifically, they wrote in "koine" Greek, the common dialect spoken by most people in the Roman Empire in the first century.

Just as translation was necessary for those who did not speak the original language then, so also translation is necessary for us today if we do not understand the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Though this seems simple in theory, the application of translation is more complicated. There are two primary methods applied in language translation. They are known as "Formal Equivalence" and "Dynamic Equivalence."

Formal Equivalence

This method of translation aspires to give a literal, word-for-word rendering of what is written. It tends to be more accurate, but also tends to be more difficult to read because the grammatical rules and sentence structure can differ by language. If you really want to see a literal translation, get yourself an interlinear Bible…it will show the original text with literal translation underneath; they can be hard to read since Hebrew and Greek grammar differ from English, but they will shed much light on confusing passages.

Dynamic Equivalence

This method attempts to give a thought-for-thought rendering of what is written. In other words, the translators try to tell you what the original words meant. The glaring weakness of this method is that it opens the door for translational error because it allows the translators to give their interpretation. Sometimes this does make it easier to read, and allows the translators to use modern terminology.

Some translation troubles

There are several problems when translating any language. Sometimes the original languages will imply words that are not explicitly stated; translators supplement this (fill in the blanks) by inserting words, which are printed in *italics*. Take careful note of this when you read the Scriptures…words printed in *italics* are added by the translators to aid the translation.

Different words, one translation

Sometimes there are many different words in Greek that can be rendered as a single word in English. Let me give three very important examples: *love, rock,* and the preposition *for.*

The common Greek language has at least 4 different words that we translate as love. They are *agape*, *phileo*, *storge*, and *eros*. *Agape* is action that demonstrates care. *Phileo* is brotherly love that carries an emotional bond. *Storge* is family love. *Eros* is sexual and never appears in the New Testament.

The Greek language has at least 2 different words that we translate as rock, demonstrated in Matthew 16:18. When Peter said that Jesus is the Christ and Son of the Living God, Jesus responded by saying that he is Peter (*petros*), and upon this rock (*petra*) Jesus would build His church. *Petros* is a small movable stone among many, and Peter was one apostle among twelve. But *petra* is a massive immovable foundation stone, large enough that one might construct a building upon it. Jesus built His Church upon the *petra* of the true statement that He is the Christ and the Son of God; the Catholic Church erroneously teaches that Jesus built His Church upon Peter as the first pope.
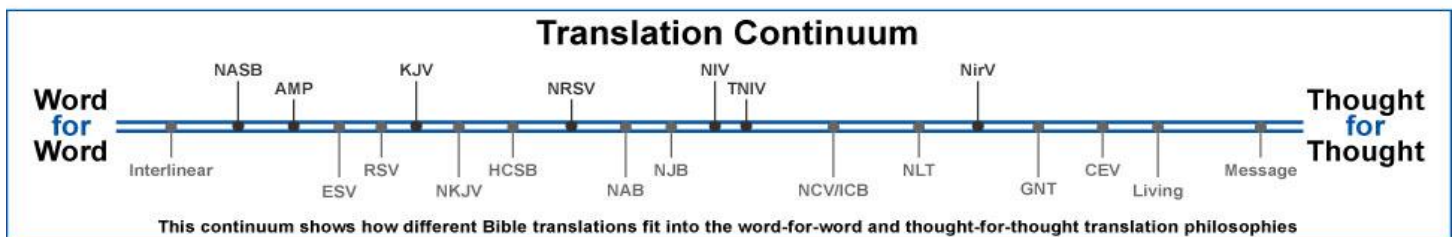
The Greek language also has many different words that are usually translated as the English preposition *for*. In Acts 2:38, the Greek word used is *eis* and it means "unto, toward, with a view to, in order to." Peter commanded people to repent and be baptized <u>for</u> the remission of sins. Another Greek word, *huper*, means "for the benefit of" and is used when one person does something for the benefit of another person, such as when Jesus died *for* us on the cross (2 Cor. 5:15; John 18:14). A different Greek word, *anti*, means "in place of, against, as a substitute, in exchange for." It appears 22 times in the Greek; the *anti*christ is anyone who would take Christ's place. The Greek word *heneka* literally means "because of, for this reason;" it appears 25 times, such as in Matthew 19:5. Yet in our modern New Testaments, all 4 of these are rendered as simply "for."

Some to avoid

Some modern Bibles are so poorly translated that they can hardly be called a translation at all. Taking the thought-for-thought method to an extreme, they are paraphrases, re-writes, and essentially commentaries that convey what the editors want them to say, rather than what the original languages actually say. These include the Common English Bible, The Living Bible, The Message, New Living Translation, New English Bible, Revised English Bible, Good News Bible, God's Word Translation, and the Joseph Smith translation, among others. Also, avoid the Orthodox Study Bible, which uses the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) as its source, rather than using Hebrew manuscripts (with translation as challenging as it is, why would anyone want to use a translation of a translation?)

Summary and recommendation

The chart below shows a scale of how Literal or Dynamic many translations are today:

Translation Continuum

NASB, AMP, KJV, NRSV, NIV, TNIV, NirV

Word for Word — Thought for Thought

Interlinear, RSV, ESV, NKJV, HCSB, NAB, NJB, NCV/ICB, NLT, GNT, CEV, Living, Message

This continuum shows how different Bible translations fit into the word-for-word and thought-for-thought translation philosophies

So far in this series, we have examined two primary characteristics of Bible translations. The first is the source of the original text. I believe that the best original text to use is one that combines the best scholarship of all

available texts, such as the 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland, rather than one that utilizes only a few such texts, such as Textus Receptus. The second trait is the translational method employed, and I believe the more literal translation (Formal Equivalent method) will render the better version for study today. On the chart above, you'll notice that the NASB and ESV satisfy both of these characteristics, so these are the ones I use and recommend. However, my strongest recommendation to you is that you acquire a parallel Bible, which has multiple translation side-by-side, so that you may compare the differences for yourself. The only thing better than that is what I wrote at the beginning of the very first article in this series: learn ancient Hebrew and Greek so that you might read in the original languages yourself.

Finally, before rushing out to buy a new Bible for yourself or for someone else, <u>be most wary of Bibles that include the editor's commentary notes</u>! Any Bible labeled as a "study" Bible is likely to include notes written by someone seeking to push their doctrine/interpretation. Almost all such "study" Bibles will say that Acts 2:38 does not really teach the necessity of baptism, and almost all such "study" Bibles will teach a millennialist interpretation of Revelation. Is that something you really want to hand to your friend or child as a gift?

The information contained herein is derived from scholarly resources available in books and online.