

Translating the Written Word of God

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By Matthew A. Vogan, Editorial Director

During 2024 the Society has given some focus to upholding the doctrine of the full, verbal Divine inspiration of Scripture. God, in seeking to provide the special revelation of His will in a permanent form chose to 'commit the same wholly unto writing'. The result is 'Holy Scripture, or the word of God written', as contained in all the books of the Old and New Testaments 'all which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life'.¹

'The word of God written' reminds us of the Saviour's repeated defence to the evil one: 'It is written' (Matthew 4.4, 7, 10). What had been originally written through inspiration remained written as the fully inspired Word of the living God.² Our Lord appeals to this abiding source of Divine authority and says, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God' (Matthew 4.4). Every word has Divine authority. The word 'Scripture' literally means 'the writing.' As the Puritan John Owen says, it is 'the writing, or word written' which 'is by inspiration from God.'³

The historic approach to translation: formal equivalence



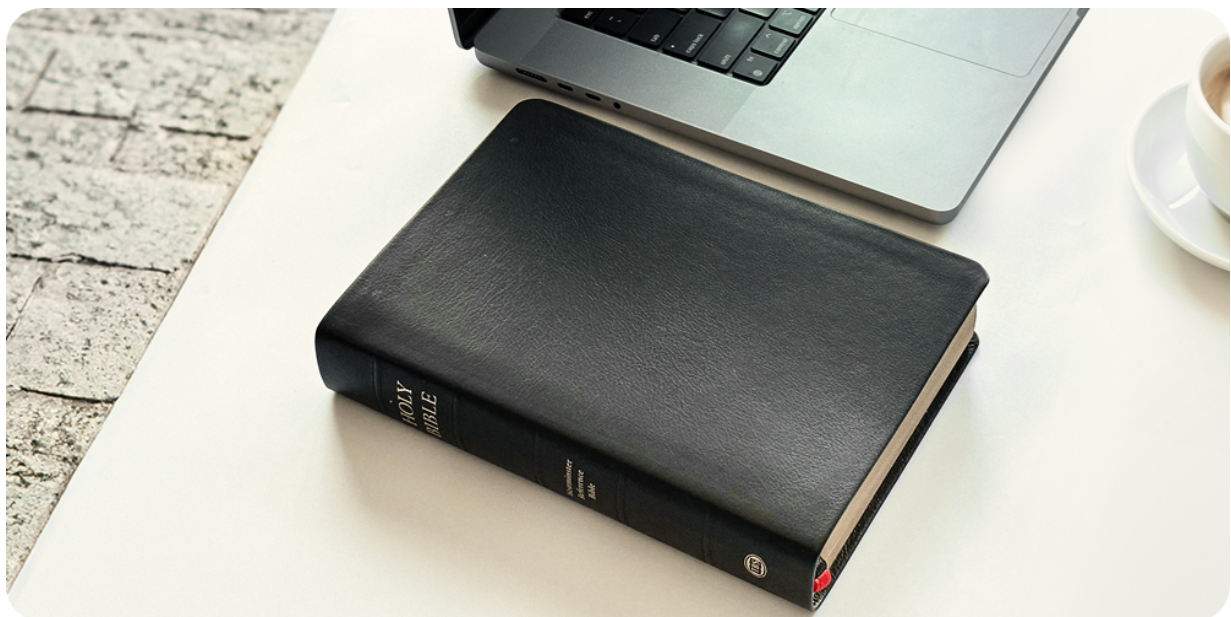
One can hold up a translation of the Scriptures and affirm, 'this is the Word of God!' Yet that may prompt the further question, 'but to what extent?' Clearly, being a translation, it is not in the exact structure and vocabulary of the language in which it was originally written. Yet translations share that same Divine authority to the extent that they are transparent and faithfully represent the originals. This was the view also

of the translators of the Authorised (King James) Version; in their introduction they wrote that a monarch's letter retains regal authority and authorship when translated into another language, and that this is the same with the Word of God.⁴

John Owen affirms that we may be fully confident that the Word is 'preserved unto us entire in the original languages; where, shining in its own beauty and lustre ... it manifests and evidences unto the consciences of men, without other foreign help or assistance, its divine original and authority'. The ellipsis indicates the following in parenthesis: 'as also in all translations, so far as they faithfully represent the originals'.⁵ The Holy Spirit may still use those words in translation to persuade us of the full Divine authority of the Word, but the ideal approach is to have as much as possible of the original available: this is called **formal equivalence**.

From the Reformers onwards, the standard of a faithful and accurate translation was measured against the degree to which it reproduced the form of the original.⁶ 'For translations of Scripture are always to be brought back to the originals of Scripture, received if they agree with those originals and corrected if they do not'.⁷ After all, it was not like any other book. Instead, every word is inspired; it is the Word of God written.⁸

The modern approach to Bible translation: dynamic or functional equivalence



The formal equivalence approach prevailed as the proper way of translating the Scriptures across church history until in the twentieth century another standard was erected. This modern approach has been called **dynamic** or **functional equivalence**. Instead of measuring accuracy primarily against the original text, it is principally measured in relation to the intended reader.

This means that meaning and message are now paramount, and the translation should communicate exactly as if it was part of the culture and everyday expression in the target language.⁹ Thus, the intended reader should understand this cultural approximation completely and immediately, without needing to understand the cultural context of the original. To achieve this, the forms of the original would have to be altered, and it would need to be rewritten as if originally written in the time and culture as well as the language of the reader, rather than in Hebrew and Greek when inspired by God several thousand years ago.

It is as though the ideal is to provide language that is like everyday conversation. In simultaneous oral translation an interpreter will struggle to give a word for word rendering, but Scripture is by definition the writing: it is the Word of God written and carries a fulness and richness of meaning that He intended; it must be translated as such.

While the modern goal is to reproduce both the thoughts of the original and produce the same effects that the original readers would have experienced, since we only have the words of the original, guessing the original thoughts and the widely varying impressions of the original readers is an entirely subjective and speculative process.¹⁰ We must translate the Word of God as it was written, not as we presume it was thought.

Take for instance the following verse, 'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled' (Matthew 5.6). In the Good News Bible this is rendered, 'Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires; God will satisfy them fully!' The net result is to remove the metaphors and narrow the meaning of the word 'blessed' to merely 'happy', and 'righteousness' to 'doing what God requires'. The meaning of 'they shall be filled' is narrowed and even altered to 'God will satisfy them fully'. Perhaps few evangelical Christians read the Good News Bible, but it has been held up as a gold standard for translation by many Bible translation organisations across the world. Frequently it is the very source text that is translated into Asian languages, rather than the original Hebrew and Greek.

The translators of the Authorised Version were careful in their work as we see in Hebrews 5.7. The Greek phrase τῆς εὐλαβείας in context could mean fear, reverence, or piety. The Greek word ἀπὸ before it could mean from, after, out of, because of. The translation 'in that he feared' allows the interpretation that Christ was heard in the expression of His fears, so as to be saved from His fear, or that He was heard because of His reverential Godward fear, which is offered as an alternative by the marginal note 'or for his piety'.

Conveying meaning in Bible translation



Too often in debates about translation the contrast is made between more formal translations that focus on words, and others that focus on meaning. This is a false dichotomy since a greater fulness of meaning is in fact discarded in translations that impose one particular interpretation on the original. Meaning is conveyed by all the

forms chosen by the Holy Spirit in the original, and the ideal is a transparency that helps us see as much as possible of the original in the target language. Therefore, translation should reproduce as much of those forms as possible, and simply seek to state the text as it is in the inspired original, so that, as much as possible, it is God that is speaking, not the translator. Verbal inspiration therefore limits how translation should be done.

We can see an example of how the loss of meaning includes loss of doctrinal meaning in Romans 3.24, 'Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (AV) which becomes, 'But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free' in the Good News Bible, where the word 'redemption' is lost.

Is it not self-evident that the Scriptures are different from anything other book? They have an 'otherness' through their historical character, but much more so by virtue of Divine verbal inspiration. Translators must seek to get as close to the original languages as they possibly can, rather than interpret and modify the Word to suit the reader. It is not the function of the translator to explain the meaning of the text; he must present what was written, rather than interpret or paraphrase it.

Should we translate 'he' or 'man' when that is the accurate translation of the original languages, or should we render these words with more 'gender inclusive' terms, perhaps using the plural pronoun 'they' even though the original is singular, so as not to offend the prejudices of some readers? Many translations replace the wording of Scripture that is specific in relation to gender with something that is neutral because they do not want to offend those who assume this may exclude women. This makes it no longer possible to see what the original said.

A different view of inspiration



Eugene Nida, the main proponent of dynamic equivalence, admitted that it favoured a view of inspiration in which the thoughts rather than the words were inspired.¹¹ It is of course possible to translate using dynamic equivalence while holding to the full verbal inspiration of Scripture, but the point is that it has various implications that are inconsistent with full verbal inspiration. Nida's view rests on secular theories of culture and communication that assume languages are merely a human cultural construct, and that language, even in the Biblical languages, is always limited by culture. It implies for instance, that forms and words are accidental to the underlying meaning,

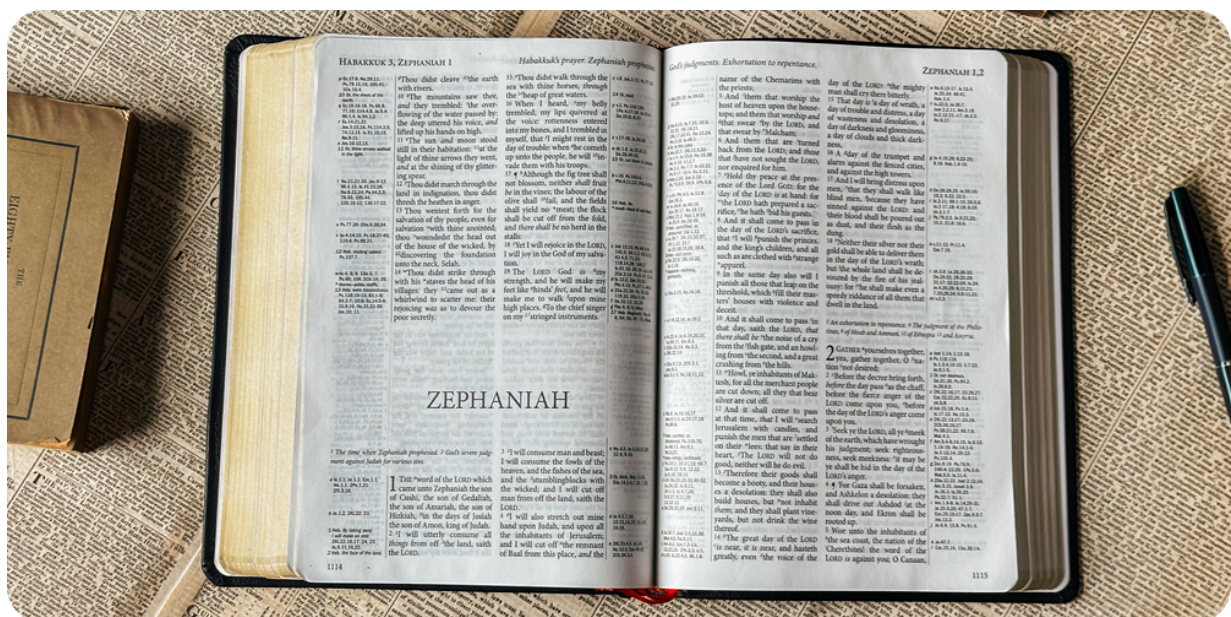
and they can be dispensed with as mere 'labels'. But we know from the way that Scripture quotes Scripture that the words and grammar are important; its mode of expression is never irrelevant or accidental.¹² God was able to use individuals and language to fully communicate His mind and truth so that we have the Word of God written. He was able to do this in such a way that they can be understood adequately by all cultures and generations through careful effort and the help of the Holy Spirit.

One of the other effects of Nida's approach was to shift inspiration from the original text to the translated text. This follows if a translator is using their 'creativity' to rewrite Scripture as if it had been written in that language and culture with the same thoughts and responses as it was originally. It is as though inspiration is happening all over again, and the inspiration event of the original is not unique. However, the translators do not receive their translation of Scripture by Divine inspiration; they are only translating what is written into another language.

Muslim idiom translation

The impact of this theory on the inspired words of Scripture can also be seen in the development of Muslim idiom translations which intentionally use wording that upholds the teachings of Islam.¹³ This is based on the idea that the message of Scripture can be adapted to the language and culture of Muslims. It includes abandoning Father-Son terminology as merely metaphorical and offensive to Muslims. There are four Arabic New Testament translations that contain the first part of the Islamic profession of faith (and means of conversion to Islam) called the *shahada* which says, 'There is no God but Allah'.¹⁴ This is also being followed in other languages where there is a majority Muslim population. As Pierre Houssney points out, such translations are counterproductive because they support Muslim claims about Christ, that the Bible has been corrupted, and are seen as a way of deceiving naïve Muslims.¹⁵ It should be clear that they undermine the inspiration of Scripture; if the title 'Son of God' is dispensable in relation to Christ, then any metaphor and doctrine is equally superfluous. The controversy around this has been said by some to have been settled by the 2013 Report to the World Evangelical Alliance but this is not so.¹⁶

Translating the Word of God



We may diminish the Bible's authority if we do not translate it accurately. The Scriptures are a 'treasure' (Matthew 13:52); literally in Greek they are a 'thesauros' or treasury of knowledge. If Scripture is not accurately translated and some parts are

omitted the value of that treasury has been diminished for making the believer 'thoroughly furnished unto all good works' (2 Timothy 3.17).

Scripture evidences itself to be the Word of God by various characteristics which it possesses. We can speak of its Heavenly subject matter, the power of its teaching, the majesty of the style, the harmony of all its parts with one another, its overall purpose and tendency (which is to give all glory to God), the full declaration it makes of the only way of man's salvation, and its complete perfection.

These intrinsic marks of authority must not be obscured in translation. If a translation obscures the majesty of the style of the original and debases its sacred character by paraphrasing it in altogether different wording, there are serious consequences. Likewise, if the connections between words, phrases, and themes are not preserved then we fail to see the harmony and something of the authority is also lost.

Scripture is the highest authority and testifies to itself, so in understanding one part of Scripture we must compare other parts with it (1 Corinthians 2.13–14). Translators must not take away from God's people the ability to interpret Scripture for themselves by imposing only one interpretation. When translators use functional/dynamic equivalence to produce a looser translation, they often only allow one particular interpretation of a verse over all other alternatives. However, their choice may not be correct, and then they actually mislead people about what the Bible is saying. Formal translations allow you to interpret the meaning as much as possible yourself, and seek to protect the reader from the opinions and bias of the translator.

Many translators substitute names where the Greek or Hebrew text has a pronoun —'he', 'she', or 'it'. A simple example is in Acts 9.27 which reads in the New International Version: 'But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him'. The Greek does not have the word 'Saul' at all neither does it repeat 'the Lord' twice. This is why the Authorised (King James) Version reads, 'But Barnabas took him, and brought *him* to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him'. Whilst it may be less debatable in this passage, the practice denies the reader the opportunity of interpreting the Bible for themselves without the subjective opinions of translators.

Sometimes words must be added in so that the wording makes proper sense in the receptor language (the language being translated into). The Society seeks to follow the historic principle of using italics in the text. This helps ensure that the reader is aware of any words or phrases which were added to the text. These words would include both the words which are demanded or implied by the original language and context, and also other 'helper' words which complete the sense of the text.

Conclusion



God carefully chose every word to convey precisely what He wanted and how He wanted to teach us. We must reject the dynamic or functional equivalent method of translation as not consistent with Scripture and what the Bible says about itself. Why should we be indifferent to the very form of words by which God has revealed Himself and His will for us? We do not need to rewrite Scripture; we need simply to translate them faithfully and accurately.

This means that the idioms, figures of speech, and difficult vocabulary in the original are translated carefully and with reverence. It also means that we should respect the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of the language we are translating into as much as possible.

We need such God-honouring, literal, idiomatic, trustworthy translations from the original languages. Sadly, few organisations are careful to follow this approach. If Christians believe in a literal approach to translation they really ought to support the Trinitarian Bible Society, whatever their other views. Translation work is needed in languages that do not have the Scriptures, but also where the existing versions are not fully accurate. Providing accurate copies of the Scriptures for the nations of the world is a truly daunting task but, depending on Divine enabling, in the projects given to us, we seek to press on to the best of our ability and, above all, to the glory of God.

► Endnotes
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