



Words and the Translator

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Purchasers of an English bible are presented with an increasing number of options. Editions vary not only in page size, type font, paper quality, binding, canonical scope (for Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant readership), and aids for interpretation (e.g., annotations and maps), but also in the wording of the biblical message. Since it is the last of these differences which occasions spirited debate among scholars, pastors, laity, and book sellers, it may be useful to clarify the major reasons for such divergence.

Differences in translation are inevitable, given realities that are both internal (no.1) and external (nos. 2-4) to the Bible. Those realities are: (1) the nature of the ancient texts from which a modern language translation must be made; (2) the nature of the receptor language (e.g., English); (3) the heterogeneous nature of the available audience; and (4) the assumptions which the translator inevitably brings to the task. These now are to be examined in turn.¹

I. THE TEXT FROM WHICH ONE TRANSLATES

Prior to the beginning of translation, a number of complex decisions must be made. The basic problem, strange as it may sound, results from the fact that there is no monolithic thing which may be defined as *the Bible*. Rather, there are: (a) many manuscripts in the languages in which parts of the Bible were first committed to writing (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), scattered in libraries throughout the world, and (b) even more manuscripts, likewise distributed, of the ancient translations (versions) of the Bible (in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and several other languages). Thus, shall one translate from manuscripts in the original lan-

¹Versions of the English Bible referred to in this essay are as follows: ASV (American Standard Version), ERV (English Revised Version), JB (Jerusalem Bible), KJV (King James Version), LB (Living Bible), NAB (New American Bible), NASB (New American Standard Bible), NEB (New English Bible), NIV (New International Version), NJV (New Jewish Version), RSV (Revised Standard Version), and TEV (Today's English Version).

guages, or from a revered ancient translation, or from some combination of the two? Since the sources differ significantly at points, this is a decision of no small consequence.

Until the present century it was usually assumed that each of the ancient versions had been based upon original-language manuscripts which were identical to those traditionally known. Thus, one could compare a Greek manuscript of the Old Testament with one in the original Hebrew and in case of divergence conclude either: (a) that the Greek translator had erred, or (b) that the translation was correct and that the Hebrew text had subsequently become "corrupt." Such an assumption led to claims of overall superiority and to heated polemics by

either side. For example, advocates of the Greek translation proclaimed, in its defense, that it had been done by seventy-two revered Jewish scholars, working independently in teams of two and finishing in seventy-two days with no divergencies! (The number of scholars and days was later rounded off to seventy and consequently the version came to be known by that number in Greek: Septuagint, or LXX.²) Not surprisingly, therefore, Justin Martyr (second century) argued that the word “virgin” must be original to Isaiah 7:14, since the Septuagint appeared to use that term (*parthenos*) whereas the Hebrew text did not (*‘almah*). He then proposed that the Hebrew equivalent of “virgin” (*bethulah*) must once have stood in the text (but subsequently had been removed by Jews).³ Later, St. Augustine (fourth and fifth centuries) would take a slightly different approach in support of the superiority of the Septuagint: the Holy Spirit “could say through the translators something different from what he had said through the original (author)...” (*City of God*, 18.43). (The status of the Septuagint in the early church may be compared with that of KJV in some modern circles: since KJV uses the word “virgin” at Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23, that must be the meaning of the original!)

By contrast, St. Jerome (fourth and fifth centuries) rejected the romantic account of Septuagintal origins and did not trust the claim that translators could advance divine revelation. For him, translation was a matter of philology, and he tended to trust “the Hebrew verity” (*Hebraica veritas*). As the basis for his translation of the Old Testament into Latin, therefore, he forsook the Septuagint and turned to Hebrew texts. (He would have considered it ironical that his version, which came to be called the Vulgate, ultimately assumed an authority of its own and became the basis for translation into other languages.)

²The earliest form of this romantic tradition is found in the Letter of Aristeas (concerning the translation of Genesis-Deuteronomy only). Later embellishments, especially in the Christian community, extended it to the entire Old Testament and Apocrypha and included the claim that all of the copies were identical. See the articles by Günter Zuntz, “Aristeas” and by John W. Wevers, “Septuagint,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. Buttrick (4 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 1.219-21; and 4.273-78.

³*Dialogue With Trypho*. In addition to being misled by the Aristeian romance, Justin made a lexical error: the Greek word *parthenos* need not mean “virgin.” However, it is interesting to note that he realized that the Hebrew term (*‘almah*) did not mean “virgin,” a bit of knowledge that escaped Martin Luther when he made his famous wager. See the article by Harry M. Orlinsky, “Virgin,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 939-40; hereafter cited as *IDBS*.

Examples of English translations which rely upon one manuscript tradition largely to the exclusion of others include: (1) from the Hebrew (Masoretic) text (MT): the New Jewish Version; (2) from the Greek (Septuagint) text: Charles Thompson, translator, *The Septuagint Bible*; (3) from the Latin (Vulgate) text: the Rhemes-Douay Version; and (4) from the Syriac (Peshitta) text: G. Lamsa, translator, *The Holy Bible*.

The discovery of new manuscripts within the last century, primarily of the Hebrew Bible, has rendered the old antitheses obsolete. The Hebrew manuscript tradition, assumed to have been monolithic from the time of the biblical authors downward and upon which the ancient versions were assumed to have been based, was now shown in fact to be largely unchanged only from the beginning of the Christian era. About that time, the text seems to have been standardized, whereas earlier there had been a variety of text-types. Some of the newly discovered types resembled the Septuagint, others the Samaritan Pentateuch, and yet others the traditional Hebrew manuscripts.

The common explanation for this newly discovered diversity is that it reflects the geographical dispersion of Israelites and Judeans at a time when their sacred traditions were still in the process of formation. They experienced, successively, invasion by Assyrians and Babylonians, domination by the Persians, and invasion by the Greeks. This led to three major loci of Jewish life: in Palestine, in Egypt, and in Babylonia. In each location, the scriptures-in-the-making (some in oral and some in fluid written form) assumed particularities of content, order, and expression.⁴ For example, the Egyptian (Septuagintal) form of Jeremiah is about one-eighth shorter than the Babylonian (traditional Hebrew) form and the chapters are arranged quite differently. Thus, chapter 41 of the former equals chapter 34 of the latter, and 39:3-14 in the latter is not found in the former.

For the translator who is concerned to recover the earliest possible form of the tradition, this means that no one manuscript or even text-type has an intrinsic claim to greater authority at every point. Every divergence, therefore, must be considered on its own merits and a decision made as to its status. It is also plausible to believe that, in general, there were never “autographs” (an *Urtext*) from which all copies descended, and thus that it is not realistic to search for “the very words” of a revered biblical speaker.

Once this ancient textual reality is grasped, the modern translator must choose a textual tradition (type) as the starting point. Since even the ancient versions are a step removed from the original (“biblical”) language, the modern decision usually has been to begin with Hebrew (and Aramaic) texts for the Old Testament and with Greek manuscripts for the New Testament. Then one must decide which manuscript within that tradition shall serve as the starting point. In the former case, is it to be the “traditional” text of the Rabbinic Bible

⁴This became clear only with the study of materials from Qumran Caves 4 and 11. The initial discoveries from Cave 1 were ancestors of the “standardized” type and generated much publicity about the fidelity with which the biblical text had been transmitted. It was then assumed (erroneously) that a similar uniformity of type and rigidity of transmission had been at work previously. For a brief introduction to these matters, see the article by Dominique Barthelemy, “Text, Hebrew, history of” in *IDBS*, 878-84.

(Bombergiana)? One of the medieval manuscripts? Various of the Dead Sea Scrolls? The preference has remained with the “traditional” (Tiberian Masoretic) text. However, we now know that it represents the text-type that was (by and large) chosen in the process of standardization in the first century (the Babylonian type), and that vowel signs were added to it only about the 10th century. The manuscript of choice has tended to be one of the earliest of that type known: Codex B 19^A in Leningrad (Leningradensis), published in later editions of *Biblia Hebraica*.

Once choices such as these have been made, then variants (both in manuscripts of the same language and in the ancient translations) must be collected. Then comes the tedious and sometimes difficult task of evaluation and elimination: Are there obvious mistranslations in the versions? Have the ancient translators adjusted the text in accordance with the demands of the receptor language? Do the translators betray a cultural or theological bias? Have scribal errors of certain standard types been made across the centuries (among them: similarity of consonantal appearance, similarity in sound, duplication, deletion, incorrect word division, transpositions)? Were the “correct” vowels added by the Masoretes, almost a thousand years after the

standardization of the consonantal text?⁵

As an illustration of textual divergence, consider the case of Proverbs 14:32. KJV (following MT) reads “death,” while RSV (following Greek and Syriac texts) reads “integrity.” (The former translation does not alert the reader to a possible alternative, while the latter notes that it is based upon “Gk Syr” instead of “Heb.”) Should the reader desire to understand how this divergence came about, an analytical concordance or a detailed commentary might reveal that it is a case of metathesis (location-exchange of consonants): Hebrew *mot* (“death”) versus *tom* (“integrity”). The question of which is prior, however, is more difficult: RSV apparently concluded that its choice better fit the context of the proverb (antithetical parallelism).

In the notoriously difficult Book of Hosea, RSV footnotes call attention to 26 instances where the Septuagint has been followed. Other translations are less regular in calling attention to such instances (e.g., NAB), and yet others may resort to the versions but rarely (NASB).

There are many places where the text, as it stands, makes sense with difficulty or not at all. One may project, therefore, a solution (restoration of the supposed original text) which is not attested in any ancient text. Such “conjectural” emendations are usually marked in RSV with the note “Cn,” often followed by “Heb uncertain.” There are 32 of them in Hosea alone. Consider 7:16, where Israel’s worship is criticized. The Hebrew text (MT) seems to say, literally: “They turn not up,” where the negative is on the wrong side of the verb and the preposition has no object. KJV tries to salvage the text by making the preposition refer to the deity: “They return, but not to the Most High” (so also NIV). The most common emendation is to substitute one consonant for another and read: “They turn to Baal” (RSV, JB). Another emendation yields

⁵A brief introduction, with illustrations, may be found in the articles by John A. Thompson, “Textual Criticism, OT” and by Eldon J. Epp, “Textual Criticism, NT,” in *IDBS*, 886-95.

the word “useless,” understood to describe either a foreign god (TEV) or Israel herself (NAB). While NEB makes considerable use of such emendation, NASB, NJV, and NIV seek to avoid it. (NASB is especially strict in this regard; NJV will call attention to such possibilities in footnotes.)

Once agreement has been reached about the original “wording” of a sentence, there may still be uncertainty about its meaning. The grounds for uncertainty may lie either in the vocabulary or in the grammar.

1. *Lexicography*: the dictionary component of translation; what does a given word mean?⁶
a. Does a “biblical” word have only one meaning (as first year students conclude from vocabulary lists which give a one-for-one equivalent) or may it have a range of meanings? Consider the case of the Hebrew noun *tsedaqah*, given in vocabulary lists with the meaning “righteousness.” Is it always to be so rendered, as “interlinear” translations tend to do and as do KJV and NASB at Psalm 22:31; 24:5; 98:2; 106:31; Isaiah 45:23; 46:12? Or, does it mean, respectively, “beneficence,” “a just reward,” “triumph,” “merit,” “troth,” and “victory” (as in NJV)?

Are some “meanings” unique to a given person or book? Did additional meanings for a word develop within the biblical period? For example, if the Hebrew noun *ruach* can mean “wind,” “breath,” and “(the divine) presence” (often translated “spirit”), which is earliest? Which of them does the author of Genesis 1:2 have in mind (RSV: “Spirit of God”; NEB: “mighty

wind”)? If the Greek noun *parthenos* usually indicated sexual inexperience (“virgin”) during the early centuries of the church, need it have had that significance centuries earlier at the time of the Septuagint (e.g., at Isa 7:14), or was it instead an age designation (“young woman”/“maiden”)?⁷

b. In addition to referential (dictionary) meanings, did biblical words have an emotive (response-evoking) meaning as do words in English?⁸ Such meanings will be much more difficult to discover. Should they be rendered by terms which evoke an equivalent response? Compare 1 Samuel 20:30 in RSV (“You son of a perverse, rebellious woman”) and in LB (“You son of a bitch!”). Or consider the connotation intended by the Hebrew noun *yonah* (“dove”) at Hosea 7:11. KJV, RSV, NEB, JB, NIV, and NASB so render it, with referential correctness but without the proper emotive association. Contrast TEV: “Israel flits around like a silly pigeon” (similarly, NEB). Again, how is one to render the Greek noun *kunarion* (“dog”) at Matthew 15:26? Is Jesus deliberately trying to be ugly when he responds to the Canaanite woman’s plea for mercy and healing by saying, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (RSV; so also NAB, NASB, NEB, and TEV). A slightly different tone is projected by JB (“house-dogs”) and even by NIV’s “toss it to their dogs.”

⁶An excellent though technical introduction to the range of problems may be found in Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), Chapter 3: “An Introduction to the Nature of Meaning.”

⁷See footnote 3.

⁸See E. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, Chapter 5: “Referential and Emotive Meanings.”

c. A number of words are used rarely in the Bible (some 500 of them occur but once in the Old Testament), and thus their meaning (however we define that term) is unclear. What, for example, is the meaning of the verb *ts-n-ch*, which occurs in only two stories in the Bible (Joshua 15:18 = Judges 1:14, and Judges 4:21)? That is, precisely what was it that Achsah did when she arrived on her donkey? Did she merely dismount (RSV and others), or did she break wind (NEB, subsequently revised to “make a noise”)?

Problems in lexicography have traditionally been resolved in one of three ways: etymology (“root” meaning), comparative philology (derivation from cognate languages), and context. Translations of the Bible differ in the relative reliability which they assign to these methodologies and in the locations at which they apply them.

Etymology: What, for example, does the Hebrew noun *na'aphuf* (a *hapax legomenon*, i.e., used but once in the Bible) mean at Hosea 2:2? When it is rendered as “adultery” (KJV, RSV, NASB, NAB) or “unfaithfulness” (NIV), appeal is being made to the commonly used verb (*n-‘p*, “to commit adultery”) from which it presumably is derived. Such an approach, however, often ignores the fact that such a “fundamental meaning” is often left behind in lexical development.⁹ Moreover, it does not fit the context very well: “Plead...that she put away...her adultery from between her breasts” (RSV; the innovative reader may be able to give that a literal understanding, not intended by Hosea). JB, while keeping that translation, explains in a note that “amulets, tattooing and other distinctive marks of a prostitute” are meant. NEB properly enters a contextual meaning directly into the text: the woman is to “banish the lovers from her bosom.”

Cognates: What, for example, did Achsah (mentioned above) really do when she arrived to ask for real estate? When NEB informs us that she “broke wind,” appeal was being made to a cognate verb in Akkadian (*tsanahu*). However, the Akkadian verb is not well attested, and that

meaning is not the most obvious one in the biblical context. Among the popular modern translations, the one which makes the most frequent appeal to cognate languages is NEB.¹⁰

Context: What, for example, was the nature of the wind which discomfited poor Jonah after his sermons against Nineveh (4:8)? The Hebrew adjective *charishith* is a *hapax legomenon*. Consonantly related verbs have the meanings “to incise, engrave,” and “to be silent,” neither of which is appropriate for the context (although the Aramaic version renders it by “silent”). One modern interpreter, following such an etymological approach based upon the meaning “incise, engrave, plow,” rendered it as “autumnal wind” (since autumn was the time of plowing). Modern versions, more reliably dependent upon context for meaning, render it by “sultry” (RSV), “hot” (TEV), “scorching” (GB, NEB), and so on. A few modern interpreters, assuming that the contextual meaning

⁹For a sustained and devastating attack upon traditional reliance upon etymology by biblical lexicographers (and especially by theologians), see James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: University Press, 1961), Chapter 6: “Etymologies and Related Arguments.” A more focused discussion may be found in his *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM, 1962).

¹⁰For discussion of the method, see James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968).

should reflect an etymological base, have proposed to emend the adjective to another *hapax legomenon*, *charisith* (derived from the noun *cheres*, “the sun,” hence “hot”/“scorching”).

2. *Syntax*: grammatical uncertainties which may lead to differing English translations of the Bible. Following is a small sampling of the many types which are encountered.

a. Lack of punctuation. Is the system which one now finds in the Masoretic (Hebrew) text of the Old Testament everywhere in agreement with the intent of earlier transmitters of the tradition? What, for example, is one to make of the first three verses of Genesis? Do they constitute three sentences (KJV, RSV, and most others)? Two sentences (NEB, NAB, RSV note)? Or one sentence (*Anchor Bible*)? Theologically, the issue would be: Does the text imply creation “out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*)?

b. The noun sentence. Since the verb “to be” need not always be formally expressed in Hebrew, where is it to be placed in the corresponding English sentence (where it is required!), and in what tense? See, for example, Deuteronomy 6:4 in RSV, where four possibilities are given as to placement. (The tense which RSV chose is present, based upon the liturgical nature of the passage, but in theory it could be past or future.) Another conspicuous instance is Isaiah 7:14 where the Hebrew text has (word for word): “The ‘*almah* pregnant,” meaning either “the ‘*almah* was pregnant,” “the ‘*almah* is pregnant,” or “the ‘*almah* will be pregnant.” The context suggests a present tense (so NEB, TEV, JB, NJV), although the Septuagint rendered it by a future tense (so also KJV, NASB, RSV, NAB, NIV).

c. Ambiguity of noun and adjective, since a given word in Hebrew may have both functions (for example, *zaqen* is both “old” and “Elder”). What, then, is one to do with part of the title of the child whose birth is described at Isaiah 9:6? Is ‘*el* (“god”) plus *gibbor* (“hero”) to be rendered as: (1) “Mighty God” (heroic *god*, KJV, RSV, TEV, JB, NIV, NASB)? (2) “God-Hero” (NAB)? or (3) “a divine hero” (Moffatt) or “in battle God-like” (a god of a *hero*, NEB)? That is, does the word ‘*el* function as an adjective (3), as a noun (1), or are both words nouns in

apposition (2)? To complicate matters even more, are there four titles in the entire verse (as all of the above assume), or are they phrases in a single title in which the translator must place the verb “to be” at the proper location and in the appropriate tense (e.g., “Wonderful in counsel is the divine hero...”)?

II. THE LANGUAGE INTO WHICH ONE TRANSLATES

Perhaps equally troublesome for a translator, and certainly giving rise to a greater number of options, is the receptor language. It has been asserted by an expert in the principles of translation that “the most numerous and serious errors made by translators arise primarily from their lack of thorough knowledge of the receptor language.”¹¹

The elements of English and the concerns of the translators which have led to divergence are many. The following list is highly selective.

¹¹E. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 150.

1. Traditional words and forms become obsolete. This is most conspicuous in the case of KJV¹² and has given rise to a number of revisions of it. Examples of obsolete vocabulary include: alway, twain, collop, and wot. Still other forms have become archaic, among them: verb endings (-est, -eth), pronouns (thou, ye, thee), plurals (kine), and verb forms (spake, digged, gat).

2. Older words and phrases have come to have additional meanings which may be misleading, if not amusing. Among them are: David’s use of “artillery” (1 Sam 20:40, KJV), admiration for “gay clothing” (James 2:3, KJV), “kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:5, KJV), “He means to...seize our asses” (Gen 43:18, NEB), and “to the vine he tethers his ass” (Gen 49:11, NEB).

How is one to render the frequent Hebrew noun *yeshu‘ah* (from the verb ordinarily rendered “to save,” and hence the usual translation, “salvation”)? What does the psalmist mean, for example, when he says, “Salvation is far from the wicked” (119:155, RSV)? For the exegetically innocent, the words of Charles Wesley’s hymn may come to mind: “A never dying soul to save, and fit it for the sky.” Since the psalmist was not party to Greek anthropology and Protestant revivalism, I usually caution my first-year student in Hebrew to avoid this term and then choose one that is more fitting for the context. NEB, for example, renders it by “deliverance” (Isaiah 26:1), “victory” (Psalm 3:8), “success” (Job 13:16), “safety” (Psalm 140:7), and so on, but KJV in each case has “salvation.”

3. Maintaining a consistent level of language throughout, while preserving (if possible) particularities of the individual writers. One would not want to mix, randomly, elements of ritualized, formal, and conversational language, to say nothing of slang. TEV has striven to maintain a “common language” level (an overlap between literary and colloquial speech which is intended to be intelligible to the largest number of readers), but NEB has sometimes been criticized for abrupt shifts in the linguistic register.

4. Avoidance of homophones (words that sound alike) and related phenomena, especially if the translation is intended for reading aloud. Examples include: “...who prophesied with the lyre” (1 Chron 25:3, RSV, NAB); “These eight did Milcah bear” (Gen 22:23, ERV); and “You must have nothing to do with loose livers” (1 Cor 5:9, NEB). This is not a frequent possibility, but the results are often memorable! To prevent it, many translations are now read aloud in committee.

5. Avoidance of ambiguity in syntax. English is imprecise in a number of constructions, conspicuous among them being the genitive (“of”) relationship. Note, for example, the following expressions from RSV which are identical in form but not in function: “knowledge of God” (Col 1:10; knowledge about, or which leads to, God); “way of truth” (2 Peter 2:2; the true way); “forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28; that sins may be forgiven); “sons of disobedience” (Eph 5:6; sons who disobey); “daughter of Zion” (Isa 1:8; maiden Zion); “love of Christ” (Rom 8:35; Christ’s love); “creation of the world” (Rom 1:20; the world was created); “day of judgment” (1 John 4:17; the day which brings judgment); “peace of God” (Phil 4:7; the peace which God brings); and “Jesus of

¹²A thorough study of KJV language from this perspective may be found in Millar Burrows, *Diligently Compared* (New York: Nelson, 1964).

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Nazareth” (Mark 10:47; Jesus from Nazareth). Such ambiguities are often present in the grammar (but not necessarily also in the context) of the original language text,¹³ and often the translators will reproduce it mechanically. TEV’s translators, steeped as they are in the relatively new field of generative grammar,¹⁴ render the aforementioned phrases as follows: “knowledge of God,” “way of truth,” “forgiveness of sins,” “those who do not obey,” “Jerusalem,” “the love of Christ,” “God created the world,” “the Judgment Day,” “God’s peace,” and “Jesus of Nazareth.” The divergence from RSV is not as much as one might have expected, but it is an improvement. The ambiguous “love of Christ” is especially conspicuous.

6. Clarity of pronominal antecedents. For example, who did what to whom in the following story: “...on the third day, which was Pharaoh’s birthday; *he* made a feast...and *he* restored the chief cupbearer to his office, *and he* put the cup in Pharaoh’s hand; but *he* hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them” (NASB, Gen 40:20-22; so also RSV, KJV). See also Genesis 44:5 where there is no antecedent for “this one” (NASB, KJV: “it”), slavishly following a similar lack in the Hebrew text. From the larger context, however, it is clear that Joseph’s cup is meant, and the Septuagint has an additional sentence which makes this clear (followed by RSV, NAB, NEB, TEV).

7. Manageable sentence length (even if it means division of verses into separate sentences), and (re-)arrangement of clauses for maximum clarity. TEV is the most sensitive and innovative translation in these regards, while NASB adheres most closely to the biblical structure (however complex or unclear it may be in English).

8. Form versus content. The Bible is an anthology, containing a variety of literary forms and levels of language. An example of the latter is the “substandard” usage of 2 Peter and the elegance of 1 Peter. Should the translator give some indication of this in the receptor language? Should one try to convey poetry as poetry? Should one try to convey rhyme, meter, assonance, puns, and archaic language? Such realities help to convey meaning, and yet the more attention one gives to them the more it will be necessary to depart from strict verbal meaning. In general, Bible translators have chosen to sacrifice form for content.

Differing considerations for literary form (poetry versus prose) and emphasis (“biblical” versus English word order) are evident in the following translations of Amos 5:1-2. The text consists of two parallel lines, each with three, then two, stressed elements, in imitation of a funeral liturgy (?). Thereby, in form as well as in content, the prophet seeks to announce the

impending doom of Israel. Each line begins with the verb (in keeping with the Old Testament's predominant narrative format). A rigid word-for-word depiction of the original might be:

Fálleen néver to-ríse (is) Vírgin Ísrael
Forsáken upón her-lánd there-is-nó-one to-raise-her-úp.

¹³E. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 101, reports that there are more than 500 grammatical ambiguities in the Gospels alone.

¹⁴Cf. *ibid.*, 59-69, 206-208 for discussion and illustration.

KJV: "The virgin of Israel is fallen; she shall no more rise; she is forsaken upon her land; there is none to raise her up." The clauses are kept intact, with the elements transposed to the English preference for subject-verb, and the format is that of prose. (Mistranslation of an appositional phrase makes it sound as if an ancient equivalent of perpetual movie virgin Doris Day has at last been seduced: "*the virgin of Israel.*")

RSV: Fallen, no more to rise,
 is the virgin Israel;
 forsaken on her land,
 with none to raise her up.

Poetic structure is clear, and the emphatic Hebrew order is maintained.

TEV: Virgin Israel has fallen,
 Never to rise again!
 She lies abandoned on the ground,
 And no one helps her up.

A poetic format is maintained, but the clauses have been shifted entirely from the verb-subject (Hebrew) format to the subject-verb (English preferential) format. Thus, it is made to sound like "common" English and not "biblical" English. (Interestingly, note that it is KJV and TEV which are similar.)

III. THE AUDIENCE FOR WHICH ONE TRANSLATES

Translation is not a detached process such that there is always "*the* correct way to say it." Rather, the finished product is intended for an audience, and in the case of the English Bible the total available audience is diverse in a number of ways. There must be a decision, therefore, as to the "target" audience and then as to the level of language which is appropriate for it. Is the translation intended for liturgical use, where traditional or archaic language would be appropriate (if not expected) and where cerebral comprehension is not always essential (or even expected)? KJV is often appreciated by this kind of audience. Is it intended for private reading by the widest numbers possible, such that contemporary vocabulary and non-biblical syntax are essential? TEV has been quite successful in this regard. Is it intended for those who want a translation that is as "literal" as possible, either because they (mistakenly) believe that meaning inheres intrinsically in

words or because they want some “feel” for biblical word order? NASB well serves those who want such “formal equivalence” rather than “dynamic equivalence.”¹⁵ Is it intended for regional use by persons whose language may often be substandard? Then a “cultural” translation, such as Clarence Jordan’s Cotton Patch Version, will meet the need. Is it intended for readers with a self-conscious theological orientation, who may prefer traditional language as an end-in-itself (hence a *new* KJV) or who may desire a translation that is sanctioned by their church (NAB or the RSV “Common Bible” for Catholics). Is it intended for a British (ERV, NEB) or American audience (hence

¹⁵On this issue, see E. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 159-160, 165-177.

ASV as an adaptation of ERV)? Is it intended for an audience that is sensitive to gender preferential (“sexist”) language? An editorial revision of RSV, now in process, will correct instances where such language has been introduced by earlier translators. For example, at Revelation 3:20 KJV had stated: “...if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him,” even though the Greek text has “anyone” rather than “any man.” (RSV had correctly rendered this verse in its first edition, but in other cases it had failed to be sensitive in this regard.)

IV. THE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE TRANSLATOR

Whether the factors which determine wording are internal or external to the ancient texts, it is the translators who will determine it at every point. It is they who will choose the text base, control the vocabulary and syntax of the receptor language version, and select the “target” audience (with its accompanying linguistic register).

How do the translators arrive at their decisions? Is it entirely a matter of detached scholarship: consideration of the data will lead to the correct decision? In actuality, a number of other factors may be at work, including the following: (a) marketability may have led the publisher to establish guidelines for the translators; (b) there may be ecclesiastical pressure to maintain traditional understandings; and (c) the cultural background, psychological needs, social values, and theological stances of the individual translator. Given the reality and power of the last of these categories, often unrecognized by the individual, it is preferable for biblical translation to be done by committee and for there to be several stages of review. Although such corporate activity may reduce creativity, it will achieve a balance of decision. In the translation of Scripture no less than in that of diplomatic correspondence, there is safety in numbers.

The virtue of group translation will be lessened if the selection of staff has been conducted along denominational (and especially credal) lines. While RSV has been quite pluralistic in the choice of translators, some others have been quite restrictive (e.g., NJV, NAB, and apparently NASB).

Prior theological assumption manifests itself in a number of ways, from which I have chosen two for purposes of illustration.

1. Attempted harmonization of texts which seem to be in tension. For example, who was it that urged David to take a census of Israel: the Lord (2 Sam 24:1), or Satan (1 Chr 21:1)? Is that tension to be brought from the Hebrew text into the English translation undisguised? If one’s assumption is that the Bible must speak for itself, then the answer is “Yes.” If questions are

thereby raised concerning “inspiration,” then the problem is inherent in the text and interpreters must accommodate themselves to reality. However, if one’s prior assumption is that the Bible *cannot* manifest genuine tensions, then the answer is “No.” A solution to the tension must then be sought, based neither upon the text nor upon the requirements of the receptor language, but upon the demands of the translator’s faith.

A move in the latter direction is evident in NASB’s treatment of 2 Samuel 24:1. It revises ASV’s “...the anger of Jehovah was kindled against Israel, and

he moved David against them” to “...the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and it incited David against them.” “He” has become “it” (the anger), thereby relieving the deity and preparing the reader to accommodate this text to 1 Chronicles 21:1. LB is more direct, giving us “David was incited,” thus changing an active voice to a passive and removing the deity entirely. (A “godless” translation, perhaps?)

2. Reading New Testament ideas into the Old Testament text where none was intended. Consider, for example, Psalm 16:10. The psalmist prays for the deity to deliver him and then expresses confidence in the avoidance of premature death: “For thou do not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit” (RSV). Parallel poetic lines indicate the identity of “me” and “thy godly one,” that is, the psalmist himself. This is the understanding of most English translations, which render the second line more accurately as “thy faithful servant” (NEB), “your faithful one” (NAB), “the one you love” (JB), and most clearly of all, with sentence-element restructure, “I have served you faithfully, and you will not abandon me” (TEV). Contrast, however, the following: “neither wilt thou permit thine Holy One to see corruption” (KJV, followed closely by NASB and NIV, the latter giving a footnote alternative: “your faithful one”). The use of capital letters suggests that the “holy one” is Jesus, whose resurrection will prevent the decomposition of his body. Lest the reader miss that implication, a note in the Scofield Reference Edition of KJV informs us that “Christ (first advent)” is meant. Such an understanding violates the form of the verse (poetic parallelism) and the context of the entire psalm (note the KJV heading: “Michtam of David”); it is unusual lexicographically, since the Hebrew word *chasideh* signifies fidelity rather than holiness (hence NEB, NAB, TEV; the word occurs 35 times and KJV renders it as “Holy One” but twice, usually preferring “saint”). Clearly, there is no basis for such an understanding other than the presuppositions of the translator.

KJV is guilty of such misleading capitalization at a few other places; NASB at many; and NIV often gives two alternatives, preferring the use of capitalization. NAB and JB, intended for use primarily by Roman Catholics, tend to relegate theological interpretations to footnotes, with NAB being the more cautious. At Genesis 3:1, for example, JB’s note tells us: “The serpent is here used as a disguise for a being hostile to God...the Devil,” whereas NAB’s note (at 3:15) tells us that it was *later* theology which saw the serpent here as the Devil (thus leaving open the question of whether the text in Genesis so intended it).