

TRANSLATION BIAS

By Steve Ray

Translating Holy Scripture is a necessary process by which the sacred text is provided in various languages, usually rendered from the original languages. Not all translations are created equal. Some result from one scholar's work, others the work of a committee of scholars. Some are literal while others tend toward paraphrase.

Translation resembles a sliding scale with each translation placed somewhere between the two opposite ends. On one side of the scale are the *literal* translations, on the other the *dynamic*. The *literal* strives to achieve exact rendering of the original language with minimal concern for readability or modern idioms. The *dynamic* end of the scale attempts to provide a readable and easily understood text even if it moves away from the literal rendering of the original language. It attempts to relay the meaning more than the literal terminology.

Theological bias becomes increasingly possible the further a translation moves toward the dynamic end of the scale. It is inevitable that some interpretation is involved in translation. Some translators, to accommodate their theological persuasion, may emphasize denominational and theological points of view. Martin Luther provided a well-known example when he added the word "alone" to the word "faith" in his German translation of Romans. An extreme example is the *New World Translation* of the Jehovah's Witnesses which subverts the nature of Christ through translation. The RSV renders John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Teaching that Jesus Christ was a creature, and not the eternal Son of God, the Jehovah's Witnesses translate the passage to conform to their heresy. Their *New World Translation* renders John 1:1 as, "In the beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god" although the article "a" is absent from the original Greek text.

Many Protestant translations display a considerable doctrinal persuasion, even a bias against Catholicism. Though nicely written and easily readable, the very popular *New International Version* is a good example. Though the NIV claims to be "international" and "transdenominational", in reality the scholars were limited to five English speaking countries and the committee

was Protestant. The “denominations” excluded Catholic and Orthodox contributors though the Preface announces a desire to “avoid sectarian bias”. In contrast, the NAB included both Catholic and Protestant scholars.

What appears to be doctrinal bias is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:15. The word “traditions” is used to translate the word *paradosis* by all major English translations. However, the NIV reads, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the *teachings* we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter (italics mine).” Instead of using St. Paul’s choice of *paradosis*, the translators used the word “teaching” (didache). This tends to obscure the Catholic implications of the text. (See also 2 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thes 3:6.)

In Acts 1:20, the word translated as “bishoprick” in the KJV and “office” by most other translations, is the Greek word *episkope* from which we get our English word “episcopal”. Peter declares that a man must succeed to the office vacated by Judas. Seemingly, to avoiding the implications of apostolic succession, the NIV renders *episkope* as “place of leadership”. On the sliding scale of translations, this choice of words is really an Evangelical interpretation very close to the dynamic end of the scale, diminishing a foundational basis for the successive office of bishop.

A final example is James 2:24 where we read in almost every English translation, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone (RSV).” The NIV renders this verse as “You see that a person is justified by *what he does* and not by faith alone (italics mine).” Although the Greek word is clearly “works” (ergon), the translators of the NIV replaced it with “what he does”, obscuring the implications that seem contradictory to the Protestant doctrine of justification by “faith alone”.

Even with these examples, it must be mentioned that the NIV translation also has its surprises. According to *So Many Versions?*, the text and note on Matthew 16:18, stating that “Peter means rock”, is “rather surprising for a conservative [Protestant] version. The traditional conservative position is that “Peter” means a rolling stone”.

All translations contain some influence of theological persuasion. However, some are more blatant than others. Readers should be aware of the theological standpoint held by the translators. The Second Vatican Council proclaims “Since the Word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable

and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books. And should the opportunity arise and the Church authorities approve, if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them (*Dei Verbum*, 22).

Referenced Works:

So Many Translations?, Sakae Kubo and Walter F. Specht, Zondervan Publishing House, 1983. p. 247.

Suggested Reading:

Divino Afflante Spiritu (“Promotion of Biblical Studies”) by Pope Pius XII, St. Paul Books.

Dei Verbum (“Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”), Second Vatican Council.

So Many Translations?, Sakae Kubo and Walter F. Specht, Zondervan Publishing House, 1983. p. 247.

The Translation Debate, Eugene H. Glassman, InterVarsity Press, 1981.
History of the English Bible, F. F. Bruce, Oxford University Press, 1978.