

Translations and Exegesis

Introduction

Exegesis is made up of two Greek words — "ex" = "out of", and "egesis" = "to lead". So exegesis means "to lead out from" the Biblical text. In other words, when we do exegesis (and we all do it, consciously or not), we are trying to draw out the meaning already in the text. We are attempting to do this while at the same time not superimposing our assumptions on that text and its meaning. What has our choice of translation got to do with this?

Words and Meaning

Words may have different meanings in different languages. For example, we talk about 'catching' a bus in English. If you think about what that would mean literally, it's laughable. But a British person would understand we're not trying to catch the bus in a butterfly net or cupped hands. Instead, it is clear that we intend to make a journey on the bus. In France you don't catch a bus. Rather, you 'take' a bus.

If someone were translating an English text which referred to catching a bus into French, they would have to make a decision as to whether to keep the English idiom in French — "Je vais attraper un bus" — or change it to a phrase that would be more readily understandable for a French person — "Je vais prendre le bus".

Missing Words

The English language does not have words to describe everything important in Hebrew or Greek. For example, the Bible has three words translated as "love" in English translations. The English language does not have equivalents to the three Greek terms — agape (selfless and unconditional love), storge (familial, affectionate love) and philia (brotherly and sisterly love). When all three words are translated as "love", we lose something. The alternative is to add something to the text to clarify, but that would involve adding words to the Scriptures. Some people would be uncomfortable with that. So, again, translators have to make a difficult decision.

Religious Words

Penance / Repentance, and Baptism / Immersion. When words go 'wrong'.

Jerome made the most influential translation in early Christianity in 382-405 AD. Pope Damasus I, who commissioned him, wanted a standardised translation for the Catholic church. Jerome translated the Hebrew and Greek into Latin. It is called the Vulgate and has had an impact on Western theology ever since. By the time he made the translation, two practices which had been normative for the New Testament church had changed. Repentance had turned into penitence, and immersion had become 'baptism'.

The Greek word "metanoia" — which means to turn around — was translated as penance because Catholic theology had developed a system of confessing sins, and performing some kind of voluntary punishment or penitential act to make amends for one's past sins or transgressions. Penitential behaviour is not the original meaning of 'metanoia', which denotes a change of attitude (2 Corinthians 7:10-12). Such a mind/heart change leads to practical change, but the change is not the repentance. Repentance is a change of heart and earns nothing from God.

The Greek word "baptizo" — to immerse, dip, cleanse or purify by washing — was not translated but transliterated. In other words, Jerome took the Greek word and transferred it into his Latin translation. Why did he not translate it 'immerse'? Because by that time, people were not being immersed in the same way they were in the New Testament. Instead, they were undergoing a ceremony which might involve pouring water over their head or making the sign of the cross on someone's forehead with water. Translating baptizo as 'immerse' would have challenged the church practice of the day and brought the theology of baptism and conversion into question. The Pope did not want that, and Jerome was not about to do that!

Here is the Latin Vulgate translation of Acts 2:38, first in the original Latin and then in an English literal translation of the Latin:

"Petrus autem ad illos: Paenitentiam agite, et baptizetur unusquisque vestrum in nomine Iesu Christi in remissionem peccatorum vestrorum: et accipietis donum Spiritus Sancti."

"And Peter said to them: Do penance, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins: and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Instead of 'change of mind' and 'immersion', we have 'penance' and 'baptism'. The Vulgate, like most translations, tends to be inconsistent. For example, take John 13:26. First, here is the modern NIV version:

"Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped (bapso) it in the dish.' Then, dipping (bapsas) the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot." (John 13:26 NIV11)

The words 'dipped' and 'dipping' come from the same word for immersion – baptizo. Jesus immerses the piece of bread, and the correct translation is made - dipped. The Latin Vulgate gets it right here.

"Respondit Iesus: Ille est cui ego intinctum panem porrexero. Et cum intinxisset panem, dedit Iudae Simonis Iscariotae."

"Jesus answered, 'It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it.' So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot."

Why does the Vulgate get it right in John 13 but wrong in Acts 2? It is because to translate Acts 2:38 accurately would contradict the theological position and practical application of that position in the church at that time. We see the danger of practice influencing translation instead of prioritising accurate translation, even if it challenges our practice.

Sharing the Faith

In my final example, I will offer you something from my history. Early on as a Christian, this passage from Philemon was a helpful spur in reminding us of the priority of evangelism. Here is the NIV translation which we all used at the time:

"I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." (Philemon 1:6 NIV)

We took the phrase in verse 6 — "active in sharing your faith" — to mean evangelism. We saw a wonderful promise here, that if we are active in evangelism we will have a better understanding of 'every good thing we have in Christ'. However, comparing this with other translations, we discover alternative meanings.

"I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ." NRSV

"and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing that is ours in Christ." CENT

"And I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ." ESV

"And I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake." NASB

"And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ." NLT

"I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ." CSB

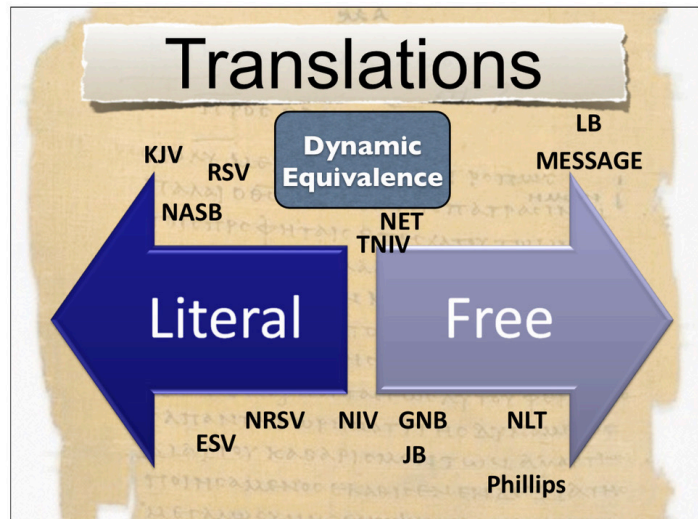
Reading through the alternative translations and considering the surrounding context, it looks as if Paul was more concerned about Philemon's faith being shared with other Christians, perhaps including Onesimus, rather than with the lost. Of course, this in no way diminishes the

significance of sharing our faith with the lost. Still, it is inappropriate to use that verse to motivate evangelism.

Translation Types

Generally speaking, translations fall into one of three buckets. Either tending towards the literal, the dynamic equivalent, or free. Here are brief definitions of these three types:

1. **Literal:** Word-for-word translations that attempt to be faithful to the text as it stands, sometimes losing intelligibility but gaining in literal accuracy. They are harder to read but generally better for deep Bible study, especially regarding controversial passages and complex theological ideas.
2. **Dynamic Equivalent:** Aims for intelligibility and ease of understanding through prioritising of conveying the ideas as thought-for-thought, not necessarily the literal words. An example of the dilemma faced by translators using this method is to imagine you were translating for a culture that had never seen snow. Would you still translate the word 'snow' as 'snow' or find a metaphor?
3. **Free:** This translation approach ranges from the 'paraphrase' style of 'The Message' translation, which does not even attempt to be literal, to the New Living Translation, which is closer to the dynamic equivalence style but freer.



The graphic above is a little dated because there have been newer translations since I put that together. Still, it gives you an idea of where translations fit roughly from highly literal to free.

Ancient and Modern

There is no such thing as a perfect translation, nor one that stands above all others. However, it is worth bearing in mind that, generally speaking, modern translations are to be preferred over old ones. This may not be the case for personal reading, but certainly for study. Why is this?

It is because our understanding of culture and language is much more advanced today than it was in the 1600s. To be clear, I have nothing against the King James Version, but it is limited because it was working from manuscripts that were not as good as the ones translators are working from today. Since then, many more Greek and Hebrew manuscripts have been discovered which are older than the ones used by the King James translators. The more recently discovered manuscripts are closer in age to the original manuscripts, fill in the gaps (in italics in the King James), and correct what are admittedly minor mistakes but nonetheless should be corrected. Additionally, the English language has changed. Therefore, at least for most people today, a more modern translation is more likely to prove accessible to most people.

Conclusion

I hope you find these notes on translations and their significance for good Bible study useful. Of course, it is a somewhat subjective area to some degree. Still, when we are trying to discern the original meaning of a tricky passage, an accurate translation, put together by people from different viewpoints, relying on the oldest manuscripts and connected to high-quality scholarship, is preferred.

Malcolm Cox

April 2023