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THE GREAT DEBATE ABOUT ENGLISH BIBLE VERSIONS: A CALL FOR REALISM AND CIVILITY

by Dave Brunn

SYNOPSIS

In the past, the King James Version was at the center of most debates about English Bible versions, but now much of the focus is on "literal" versus "nonliteral" translations. When I served in Papua New Guinea as a Bible translator, I was committed to translating the New Testament faithfully and accurately, but I quickly realized my view of translation was incomplete. English and Greek are related languages—both of the Indo- European language family—so some translation discussions among English speakers do not apply to the 94 percent of the world's languages that are non-Indo-European. As I compared English versions to the Greek text, I discovered that versions identified as "literal" are not as literal as I had thought. I found hundreds of places where literal versions such as the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible used a dynamic interpretation even though other versions used a clearly understandable word-for-word rendering. I also found many places where nonliteral versions such as the New International Version and the New Living Translation are more literal than "literal" versions such as the ESV and NASB. Often the translation debate focuses more on philosophical *ideals* than on *real* translation practice. The preface to each Bible version includes statements about the translators' *ideal* translation philosophy. But their *real* translational renderings also make noteworthy statements. When translators choose a dynamic interpretation over a viable word-for-word rendering, they are stating that dynamic interpretations are acceptable. It is fine to discuss and evaluate English Bible versions, but our discussions should be based on a comprehensive view of real translation practice, not just on philosophical ideals.

The English-speaking world is blessed to have many excellent translations of the Bible, far more than any other language group on earth. But with this blessing comes a certain amount of disagreement among Christians—and even some heated debate. *Which*

English Bible version is best? Are some versions reliable and others unreliable? What constitutes "faithfulness" and "accuracy" in translation?

For a long time, the translation debate was mostly centered on the King James Version (KJV). In recent years, however, much of the debate has shifted away from the KJV, and is now focused on "literal" versus "nonliteral" Bible translations.[1] *How literal should a translation be? Are "word-for-word" translations the only reliable ones?*[2]

Every serious Christian wants to know that the Bible they read is trustworthy. But do we really need to argue about which version is best? As a career Bible translator, I am convinced that many of the arguments about this issue are unwarranted because they are based on an incomplete, oversimplified view of Bible translation. I find that when Christians gain a more complete understanding of the complex challenges faced by every translator, they tend to be less dogmatic—and the urge to argue seems to diminish.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TRANSLATE THE BIBLE FAITHFULLY AND ACCURATELY?

The question of faithfulness and accuracy was paramount in my mind when my wife and I first arrived in Papua New Guinea in 1980. As a new missionary-translator, I was committed to translating God's Word as faithfully and accurately as possible. I thought I had a good understanding of what that meant, but when I started translating into the Lamogai (*lah-moh-guy*) language, I quickly realized that my view of translation was incomplete and a bit idealistic. Bible translation is an incredibly complex undertaking, but somehow I had developed an oversimplified view of the translation process.

It didn't take me long to realize that some of *my* standards of faithful and accurate translation were based on English grammatical features that do not exist in Lamogai. If those standards were really God's universal standards, then Lamogai would automatically be disqualified from having a faithful or accurate translation of God's Word.

One piece of the puzzle I had not taken into consideration is the fact that English and *koine* Greek are related languages—both members of the Indo-European language family. That means the degree of literalness that exists in some English versions of the New Testament is largely due to the fact that the translators were translating from one Indo-European language into a distantly related language.

I realized that I had unintentionally made English the ultimate standard for Bible translation. This realization became even more striking when I learned that only 6 percent of the world's living languages are classified as "Indo-European."[3] That means 94 percent of the languages spoken around the world today are *not* related to *koine* Greek in the way English is. My view of translation was based on a pretty narrow segment of the worldwide linguistic landscape. But there was another important revelation in store for me as a new translator.

Are the "Literal" Versions Really Literal?

As I continued translating the New Testament into Lamogai, I frequently compared various English versions side-by-side with the Greek text. That is when my idealistic perception of translation really started to unravel. It quickly became apparent to me that the English Bible versions identified as "literal" versions are not nearly as literal as I had thought.

I was surprised to see how often "literal" versions chose to translate *thought for thought* in places where they could have translated *word for word*. For example, 2 Timothy 2:5 includes the phrase "is not crowned," but the New American Standard Bible (NASB) changed it to "does not win the prize." The meaning is all there, but it is not a literal rendering.[4] This happens in the Old Testament as well. In Daniel 11:7, the NASB replaced "a branch of her roots," with "one of the descendants of her line." The NASB has often been called the "most literal,"[5] yet there are hundreds of places where the NASB translators chose to translate thought for thought even though they could have translated word for word.[6]

The English Standard Version (ESV) also translates thought for thought in many contexts.[7] In Mark 9:3, the ESV replaced "no *launderer* on earth" with "no *one* on earth.[8] And in Galatians 1:16, the ESV translated the phrase "I did not consult with *flesh and blood*" as "I did not...consult with *anyone*." I consider the NASB and ESV to be excellent translations; and all of these thought-for-thought renderings are perfectly acceptable, but they are not literal.

As I continued comparing English versions, I found a surprising number of places where notably nonliteral versions are actually more literal than versions we think of as literal. For example, in Proverbs 24:32, the New International Version (NIV) provided an essentially literal rendering of the phrase "I applied my heart,"[9] but the ESV interpreted it to mean "I considered,"[10] and the NASB, "I reflected." Also in Psalm 44:14, the New Living Translation (NLT), along with the NIV, translated the phrase "shake their heads"[11] quite literally, but the ESV and NASB both changed it to "laughingstock."

Figure 1 contains a few more places where the NIV (and sometimes NLT) gave an essentially literal rendering, while the ESV and NASB both opted for a dynamic interpretation:[12]

ESSENTIALLY LITERAL RENDERING	ESSENTIALLY LITERAL RENDERING	DYNAMIC INTERPRETATION	DYNAMIC INTERPRETATION
	NIV	ESV	NASB
Gen. 16:6	*your slave is in your **hands***	*your servant is in your **power***[13]	*your maid is in your **power***
Ps. 69:14	*those who hate me*[14]	*my enemies*	*my foes*

Lam. 2:3	*every **horn***	*all the **might***	*all the **strength***
2 Cor. 11:29[15]	*of Israel and I do not inwardly burn?*[16]	*of Israel and I am not indignant?*	*of Israel without my intense concern?*

It has been suggested that "literal translations" such as the ESV and NASB "depart from complete literalness only…in cases where a truly literal translation would make it nearly impossible for readers to understand the meaning."[17] But this description of literal versions is not supported by the evidence in the examples above. The essentially literal phrase "I applied my heart" (Prov. 24:32) in the NIV is quite easy to understand, but the ESV and NASB chose to paraphrase it as "I considered" and "I reflected." Also, every English reader understands the NLT and NIV's literal phrase "those who hate me"[18] (Ps. 69:14), but the ESV and NASB decided to change it to "my enemies" and "my foes." Careful examination will show that there are hundreds of instances where the ESV and NASB translators chose to use a dynamic interpretation even though a clearly understandable word-for-word rendering was available.[19]

I do not question the legitimacy of any of these dynamic renderings in the ESV and NASB. But I do question the notion that it is only "*on extremely rare occasions* [that] an essentially literal translation (e.g., the ESV or NASB) contains something other than an expression of the actual words used by the author."[20]

IDEAL VERSUS REAL

Why has the question of "literalness in translation" become such a confusing and divisive issue? One reason is that Christians often focus exclusively on translation *ideals* without fully investigating the *real* world of translation practice. This pattern is evident in many of the books and articles that have been written about the translation debate. Authors often start by explaining their predetermined point of view and then use a few carefully selected translation examples that support their philosophical position. When the translation discussion is confined to the realm of philosophical ideals, it often comes down to little more than a difference of opinion.[21]

Most Bible versions include a preface or introduction at the beginning that outlines the translators' philosophy for that version. It paints a picture of the target area the translators generally aim for in making translational choices. Some versions set their target area on the literal end of the spectrum, some set it on the idiomatic (nonliteral) end, and some aim for a range somewhere in the middle.

When the translators of any given Bible version describe their target area—whether on the literal or idiomatic end of the spectrum—they are making important statements about their translation philosophy. These statements represent the ideals of the translators. But there is another important way translators make statements about their translation philosophy—that is through the *real* renderings they choose to use in various contexts.

The prefaces to both the ESV and NASB state that the translators embrace a philosophy of "word-for-word" translation. This speaks to their translational *ideal*, but not to the *real* renderings in every context. We saw several examples earlier where the translators chose to abandon the ideal of word-for-word translation even though a clearly understandable "literal" rendering was available. Every time the translators abandoned their stated *ideal*, they were making an important statement about their translation philosophy, which must be considered alongside of the contrasting statements made in their prefaces.

For example, we saw in Psalm 44:14 that the ESV and NASB opted to use a dynamic interpretation, "laughingstock," instead of an essentially literal rendering such as "shake their heads" (as in the NLT and NIV). In so doing, the ESV and NASB translators were in essence saying it is fine for translators to set aside a viable word-for-word rendering and replace it with a dynamic interpretation. They made the same basic statement in Psalm 69:14 when they chose not to use the essentially literal phrase "those who hate me" (as in the NLT and NIV), but interpreted it as "my enemies" (ESV) and "my foes" (NASB). They did not change the underlying meaning, but they took significant steps away from the original form.

Another example is 2 Corinthians 11:29, where the ESV and NASB translators chose not to use an essentially literal rendering such as "I do not inwardly *burn*" (NIV) or "I do not *burn* in anger" (NLT). Instead, they replaced this metaphorical phrase with nonfigurative phrases: "am I not indignant" (ESV) and "without my intense concern" (NASB). These translational choices indicate that the ESV and NASB translators believe it is fine for a translator to remove a figure of speech such as "burn" and replace it with a nonfigurative word or phrase that is similar in meaning.

In Mark 9:3, the ESV translators made another significant statement, when they replaced "no *launderer* on earth" with "no *one* on earth." In this case, they concluded that it is acceptable for translators to leave some components of meaning (such as "launderer") untranslated.

These are just a few of the many places where the translators of a literal version gave tacit approval to classic dynamic equivalence translation principles through their translational choices.[22]

When the ESV and NASB translators abandoned their ideal of "literal" translation in these contexts, it was not because of grammatical constraints; nor was it required for the sake of understandability. Instead each of these cases represents a judgment call on the part of the translators—an elective decision to provide a thought-for-thought interpretation rather than a word-for-word rendition of the original text.

DEFENDING THE TARGET

Much of the discussion about "literalness in translation" is focused on defending the "literal" target area, or promoting it as superior. But this discussion falls flat when we see hundreds of instances where the translators of literal versions turned aside and intentionally aimed *away* from their defined target area—even though aiming toward their target was clearly a viable option.[23]

If these translators had missed their target only on "extremely rare occasions"[24] when it was virtually impossible to hit, that would be one thing. But they frequently chose not to even aim at their target. In so doing, they implied that *their* target is not the only acceptable target. What is the point of arguing *which target is best* if translators frequently choose to disregard their target, even in contexts where they easily could have shot a bull's-eye?

What Are the Logical Conclusions?

Some authors who prefer literal Bible versions have suggested a philosophy of translation that supports the following premise: A clearly understandable rendering *inside* the "literal" target area is more faithful, more accurate, and more consistent with the doctrine of verbal inspiration than a rendering *outside* of that target area.[25]

If we embrace this premise, however, we must also embrace the logical conclusions it leads to, based on the verifiable evidence available to us. Let us explore this a bit further.

We noted earlier that there are hundreds of places where the ESV and NASB translators chose to step away from the "literal" target area even though a clearly understandable "literal" rendering was available.[26] For example, in Mark 9:3, the ESV rejected the essentially literal rendering "no *launderer* on earth" and replaced it with "no *one* on earth." And in Daniel 11:7, the NASB chose to use the interpretive rendering, "one of the descendants of her line," instead of an essentially literal rendering such as "a branch from her roots."

Using basic rules of logic, let's apply the evidence in these examples to the premise mentioned above, which I will call "Premise A."

Premise A: A clearly understandable rendering *inside* the "literal" target area is more faithful, more accurate, and more consistent with the doctrine of verbal inspiration than a rendering outside of that target area.

Premise B (the verifiable evidence): There are many places where the ESV and NASB chose renderings that are outside of the literal target area, even though a clearly understandable literal option was available.

Conclusion (based on premises A and B): There are many places where the ESV and NASB elected to use a rendering that is less faithful, less accurate, and less consistent with the doctrine of verbal inspiration, even though a viable alternative was available within their defined target area.

Analysis

If we embrace the premise that *a viable rendering inside the literal target area is more faithful, accurate, and consistent with the doctrine of verbal inspiration*, we must also embrace the logical conclusion that *the ESV and NASB translators frequently elected to use renderings that are less faithful and accurate, and less consistent with verbal inspiration*. If, however, we

reject this conclusion (as I do), then we must also reject the premise on which it is built. We cannot have it both ways.

There is a second conclusion that "Premise A" would imply. We noted earlier that there are a number of places where idiomatic versions such as the NIV and/or NLT chose a rendering *inside* the literal target area, while the ESV and/or NASB renderings fall *outside* of that area.[27] Again, if we embrace the premise that *a viable rendering inside the literal target area is more faithful, accurate, and consistent with the doctrine of verbal inspiration*, we must also embrace the logical conclusion that *there are a significant number of places where the NIV and/or NLT are more faithful and accurate and more consistent with the doctrine of verbal inspiration than the ESV and/or NASB.*

Based on these examples, we can confidently say that the translators of the ESV and NASB have proven by many of their translational choices that a viable rendering inside the "literal" target area is not necessarily more faithful, accurate, or consistent with the doctrine of verbal inspiration than a rendering outside of that target area.

Several months ago, I shared some of these examples with a member of the translation committee of a major English Bible version. He asked me, "Why do you want people to know these things about literal English versions?" I replied, "If these things are true, why would we *not* want people to know them?"

I have no desire to disparage "literal" English versions or any other kind of version. My aim is humbly and respectfully to present objective evidence that has often been left out of the translation discussion. My hope is that this evidence will dispel some of the unnecessary disunity related to the issue of Bible translation.

TOWARD A FAIR AND OBJECTIVE DISCUSSION

In this article, we have focused mainly on "literal" English versions of the Bible—specifically the ESV and NASB. I do not question the legitimacy or value of these versions—but I do question some of the claims that have been made about them.

Along with examining "literal" Bible versions, there is certainly room for scrutinizing and evaluating renderings in "nonliteral" versions. (I am not prepared to defend every rendering in the NIV and NLT—or in any version, for that matter.) But when we discuss translation issues, we need to be careful not to condemn a few versions for making the kinds of translational choices that *every* version makes in some contexts. The only way our discussion can be fair and objective is if it is anchored in a comprehensive view of *real* translation practice—not merely in philosophical *ideals*.

Dave Brunn, author of *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (InterVarsity Press, 2013), spent more than twenty years in Papua New Guinea as a missionary-translator with New Tribes Mission (www.ntm.org), completing a translation of the New Testament into the *Lamogai* language.

NOTES

1   See Dave Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

2   See Wayne Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God? Why Plenary Inspiration Favors 'Essentially Literal' Bible Translation," in C. John Collins et al., *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005).

3   M. Paul Lewis, ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 16th ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2009), www.ethnologue.com.

4   The NASB footnote for 2 Timothy 2:5 says, "Lit *is not crowned*."

5   Updated NASB (1995), title page.

6   Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions*, 23–33; 52–59; 90–98; 107–27; 141; 171–78.

7   Ibid., 30–33; 52–59; 107–27; 141; 153; 174–79.

8   The ESV footnote for Mark 9:3 says, "Greek *launderer (gnapheus)*."

9   The NASB footnote for Proverbs 24:32 says, "Lit *set my heart*"; the ESV has no explanatory footnote for this verse.

10 See Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God?" under the heading "The Missing Heart."

11 The NASB footnote for Psalm 44:14 says, "Lit *shaking of the head*"; ESV: "Hebrew *a shaking of the head*."

12 Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions*, 32, 174.

13 See Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God?" 35–37, under the heading "The Missing Hands."

14 Also NLT.

15 The NASB footnote for 2 Corinthians 11:29 says, "Lit *and I do not burn*"; the ESV has no footnote for this verse.

16 The NLT also translated this phrase quite literally as "and I do not burn with anger?"

17 Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God?" 24.

18 The NASB footnote for Psalm 69:14 says, "Lit *those who hate me*"; the ESV has no explanatory footnote for this verse.

19 Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions*, 23–33; 52–59; 90–95; 107–27; 141; 171–79; 189–90.

20 Leland Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 189–90, emphasis added.

21 Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions*, 16.

22 Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions*, 23–33; 52–59; 90–95; 122–23; 171–79; 189–90.

23 Ibid.

24 Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 189–90.

25 See Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God?" 55–56; Also: Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 99, 193–94.

26 Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions*, 23–33; 52–59; 90–95; 122–23; 171–79; 189–90.

27 Ibid., 32–33; 52–59; 93–95; 110–17; 122–23; 171–79.