Bible Translation Policy

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This article questions the policy widely accepted among scholars for translating the Bible into English (or other languages). Professor Gordon F. Fee's excellent book 'How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth', although written for general use, is used here as the basis of that questioning because it not only provides perhaps the best explanation of that widely accepted policy, but also sets out clearly the technical evidence and scholarly argument for it. But the same thinking is to be found in many other works of scholarship (see the Bibliography).

The article is divided into three parts. It first looks at a perceived tendency to overstate in the argumentation for the accepted policy. It then analyses the detailed arguments for the current policy. Finally, it suggests an alternative policy.

If there is a tendency to overstate parts of the argument for the accepted policy, that raises a question about the accuracy of the judgement underlying the conclusion reached, the policy itself. Has that been taken too far?

Here are some examples of overstatement.

'There is no one-to-one correspondence between English and Hebrew or Greek.'[i][1] That is to say, you cannot just take the words in a sentence written in any foreign language and translate them one by one with a corresponding English word. This is clearly right as a generalisation, but it is stated as being universally true. Sometimes however it is possible to translate word for word from the one language into the other. 'In the beginning was' in 'In the beginning was the Word', for example.[2] Or ' a man sent from God'. [3] ' in the prophets' [4]

Another example of overstatement. 'Most words in any language don't have one "literal" or all-encompassing meaning. They have a range of potential senses.'[5] There are certainly many words of this kind. I have taken three pages at random in a Greek Bible dictionary and 15 out of the 29 words listed had more than one meaning or shade of meaning. Only a small sample, but it does (just) support the statement in the book, taken literally, that 'most' words are of this kind, in this sample 15 out of 29. The expression 'most words' however gives the impression that it is usually the case, in much more than a bare majority, that words have multiple meanings. But what is the evidence for

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[1] Fee, Gordon D and marl L Strauss, How to Choose a Translation for All its Worth P.49
[2] John 1.1.
[3] Ibid. 1.6.
[4] Mark 1.2.
[5] Fee p.47.

that? There are many words which don't (in my small sample 14 out of 29). Once again, the point being made is overstated.

A third example of exaggeration. 'You may wonder whether any translation can get it absolutely right. The answer is both no and yes, depending on whether one keeps the word "absolutely". If we were to change that to "essentially right", then the answer is a positive yes.'[6] But the author has himself quoted instances where translators have differed in their interpretations (for example on page 71) – one or more must be wrong. Elsewhere he points out that 'because languages are different, it is not always possible to translate words according to their closest English equivalent *and* retain verbal allusions. Unfortunately, something may be lost in translation.' [7] 'No version can capture all of the meaning.' [8]. And again, 'the goal… with all good translation is to preserve *as much of the meaning as possible* ' (my italics) 'for the target audience.' [9]. Occasionally – fortunately rarely – 'the meaning of a particular word or phrase is uncertain'. [10]. Translations can then differ.

And he even writes: 'Sometimes the translators really get it wrong'. [11] So although what he says – that the translations are 'essentially right' - is doubtless usually true, on his own analysis, we cannot be sure that any translation we use is always right. Elsewhere he admits as much: 'since all translation involves interpretation, it follows that no translation is perfect.'[12] (Elsewhere he writes 'all translation is' - not 'involves' – 'interpretation', itself an example of overstatement. P.52, and compare pp, 58, 69, 78 and 89.) And of one translation, he writes that it 'should always be used with other more historically accurate versions.'[13] – obviously because by itself it is not an adequate translation.

Perhaps what follows is a matter of interpretation of the word 'essentially' but some of us would not regard even a translation which did not capture a nuance in the original as 'essentially right'; but that happens. 'The original may carry nuances that the closest English equivalent doesn't'.[14]

A fourth example of overstatement. 'There is a common perception among many Bible readers that the most accurate Bible translation is a "literal" one. By literal they usually mean one that is "word-for-word" …'[15] . But most people have enough experience of a foreign language to know that it is often not possible to translate word for word – one of the first expressions we learnt at school was 'Comment allez-vous' (or equivalent) . At worst on second thoughts, almost everyone would

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[6] Op.cit. P.60
[7] Op.cit. P.57
[8] Op.cit. P.29
[9] Op.cit. P.75
[10] Op.cit. P.129
[11] Op.cit. P.13
[12] Op.cit. P.31
[13] Op.cit. P.157
[14] Op.cit. P.51
[15] Op.cit. P.25

accept that "literal" cannot mean always translating word for word, but sticking to the original words only wherever possible, and as close to them as possible where not..

This tendency to overstate is important because, as we shall find, the problem with the accepted policy for translating the Bible is not so much with the overall intention as with the taking the implementation of it too far.

I turn next to the detailed arguments used for the most widely accepted policy for translating the Bible. But first: what is that policy understood to be? In Professor Fee's words: ' the best of all worlds is to be found in a translation that aims to be accurate as regards meaning, while using language that is normal English.'[16] And again: 'the best translation is one that remains faithful to the original meaning of the text, but uses language that sounds as clear and natural to the modern reader as the Hebrew or Greek did to the original readers.'[17] That sounds unexceptional as a principle, but what is it thought to involve in practice? In particular, and this is the nub of the matter, how much does the emphasis on normal modern English (perhaps even inevitably) compromise the aim to be accurate?

Indeed, Professor Fee's own examples and explanations show that there must be compromise, that it is not always possible to be 'truly faithful to both languages', the source and the receptor.[18]

Let us look at what this translation policy requires.

First, the updating of language. When words lose the meanings they had, that is clearly necessary. 'Prevent' no longer means 'go before'. Not only that, it means something very different.

Sometimes however words accrue new meanings without wholly losing their past meanings. There are two examples given in Professor Fee's book [19] of words which in the course of time have been given new meanings, 'pitiful' in the King James' Version of James 5.11, and 'gay' in James 2:3. This is said to be a problem because the modern reader would attribute to the words their new meanings.

But would they? Surely no ordinary person would suppose that 'pitiful' as applied to our Lord had its new derogatory meaning (no-one seems to have done so in the incident Professor Fee relates). Either they know that 'pitiful' also means something like 'full of compassion' or they know that they have to find out what this word means in that context. The text is clearly not insulting the Lord. And

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[16] Op.cit. P.19
[17] Op.cit. P.26
[18] Op.cit. P.22
[19] Op.cit. P.51

similarly 'gay clothing' clearly does not in that context mean 'homosexual clothing' (whatever that may be).

Just as words in Greek often retain more than one meaning, even when new ones develop, so do words in English and we have to understand them in the context in which they are used. The average reader of the Bible may never have put that concept into words, but instinctively applies it.

The point here is that the pursuit of the aim of clear and normal English results in too great a readiness to change words. There is a trivial example on page 63. Both Hebrew and Greek have the idiom 'answered and said'. This, we are told, describes only the one action and so should be translated by one word, whether 'answered' or 'said'. But, while in this example it scarcely matters, there are strictly two thoughts in the idiom – first that he made an answer and second what he said in answer – and it causes no problem to translate both words, even though we would not normally do so in modern speech. No-one is misled by reading both words.

By omitting one of the words in such a case, we unnecessarily run the risk of leaving out something important, and this can be the case even where we have not yet identified it.

Where translating the original idiom as it stands is clear, therefore, even if the result is not what we would normally say, it is safer to do that.

In some cases, it can be more than safer. For there can then be a problem in finding an alternative which adequately reflects the original. Or the alternative used is too 'contemporary or slangy' and 'soon sounds silly' (Professor Fee's own words [20]. Even where that extreme is avoided, since language does not stand still, 'translations should be revised periodically to reflect language changes.' But how many Christians buy new updated versions, even if aware that one has been produced?

The advice given[21] is 'to use more than one version and to choose translations from across the translation spectrum'. Excellent advice, but how many Christians in the pew actually do this or are ever likely to do so? The proclaimed aim of the accepted translation policy is to target one's audience, but one's audience is one which for the most part does not know of or follow this advice. If the translation is really going to target its audience, it therefore needs to take this into account.

``   Technical theological terms create their own problem. Words like 'propitiation ' or 'expiation' incorporate more than one nuance of meaning. Because they are thought unintelligible to the ordinary Christian, the accepted translation policy suggests that translators should find a more easily understood word. But if translated by a word which gives only the one nuance, that translation is misleading. By definition it is not giving all that is in the original.

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[20] Op.cit. P.51
[21] Op.cit. P.57

Or a word may be an everyday and easily understood word for the readers of the times when the books of the Bible were written, but not for readers, or for particular groups of readers, today. It is said for example that an Eskimo has never seen a sheep and does not know what the qualities of a shepherd are. To call Jesus the Good Shepherd therefore means nothing to him. The accepted translation policy therefore finds the nearest equivalent in Eskimo experience. But this cannot match fully the concept in the original language. In this instance Professor Fee agrees that 'the best solution here is to retain the metaphor and educate people about the nature of sheep', but not all translators agree..

The danger of the accepted policy approach – of trying to find an inevitably approximate equivalent - is illustrated by an actual example given by Dr Schweitzer when a 'dry season' did not arrive in the part of Africa he was in [22]

'That there should be no dry season is something that the natives have never experienced or heard the old people talk about. This gives a shock to many Christians, because, since the native languages have no words for summer and winter, the missionaries have translated the promise of God in Genesis, made after the Flood,: "While the earth remaineth, wet season and dry season, day and night, shall never cease." So now they want to be told why it is that the weather does not go on as the Bible says it will.'

The answer is of course that the Bible did not say that the weather itself would always be the same. Well-meaning translators have changed what the Bible says, but it is possible that they end up weakening the faith of some.

The chief danger is that in substituting an English idiom for that of the original language, we lose a truth. An example is where as regards the words in Mark 12:20 'the first took a wife', it is objected that 'no-one today under forty, and not raised on Scripture, would ever say that they are going to 'take a wife'. It should be translated 'married''. [23] But that loses sight of the fact that the concept of the male taking a wife (even though it is not a prominent thought in this context) rather than just 'marrying', is central to God's revelation of His relationship with His people.

Even where it does not seem to be a matter of importance, it is questionable whether a translator should intrude his own interpretation, especially if he does so without warning the reader that he has added to the original text. An example is in Luke 18:13, quoted on page 39, where the tax collector 'beats his chest' and one translation is implicitly commended for having added 'in sorrow'. Perhaps it was in sorrow, but it may have been in repentance or consciousness of

[22] On the Edge of the Primeval Forest p.153
[23] Op.cit. Pp 64/5

unworthiness. The translator means to be helpful but in doing so imposes his own idea on the unsuspecting reader.

A more important example is in the opening verse of the Book of Revelation. The original has a genitive – 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' – which could mean either that it was Jesus who gave the revelation or that the revelation is about Jesus. One version removes the ambiguity and imposes its own interpretation by translating: 'the revelation from Jesus Christ'.

There are many other similar examples involving the genitive, e.g. in Romans 1.17: 'the righteousness of God', in Colossians 3.16 ' the word of Christ', 'the paths of righteousness' in Psalm 23.3 and in a number of texts 'the fellowship of', where some versions give their own interpretations which may or may not be correct.

'If the sense of the Greek genitive' writes Professor Fee 'is clear from the context, why should translators withhold this meaning from readers?' [24] But, as his own examples have shown, the urge to convey meaning to readers results in translators giving what they presumably think is the clear meaning but which other scholars do not agree is necessarily the right one. (Quite apart from the possibility that scholars collectively have been wrong, which has happened.)

Although it may well turn out to have been right, it is surely not the task of a translator to restrict God's warnings to their own idea of how they will be fulfilled. In Jeremiah 11.22 'the young men shall die by the sword' may well come about 'in battle' – which some translations give in place of 'by the sword' - but the text does not say so and there are other possible scenarios of death by the sword.. 'Gave special strength to Elijah' is not necessarily what 'the hand of the Lord was on Elijah' means 1 Kings 18.46.

Another instance where part of the truth may be lost is in modernising measures of various kinds. It is clearly helpful to tell the reader what so many stadia or cubits are in modern terms. But that changes the numbers. There will not be the same number of miles as stadia or metres as cubits. But the number in the original may have prophetic significance. An example is in the measurements of the tabernacle. All to do with that (although the writer to the Hebrews could not at the time go into all the details he listed in chapter 9 vs. 2 – 6) are prophetic of aspects of Christ's ministry. We alter the figures (by modernising the measurements) at our peril.

To put in a footnote the modern equivalents of outdated measurements is helpful. But the text should not be changed in that way.

There is even another danger. 'The translator must first comprehend how the biblical text would have been understood by its original readers, and must then determine how best to convey

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[24] Fee P.83

this message to those whose first language is English'. [25] But the meaning of God's word is not always exhausted by the message received, and intended to be received, by the listeners or readers of the time. That message certainly needs to be conveyed to the modern reader, but not at the expense of so changing the wording that any secondary meaning is lost.

The danger is increased by the possibility, which in humility we must confess, that we don't necessarily always yet know the secondary meaning or even that there is one. A possible example is on page 27 where it is commended that 'flesh' in the text 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' [26] is in many versions translated by 'people', 'humanity' and 'mankind', or 'all flesh' by 'everyone'. But that assumes that the 'flesh' which will see the salvation of God will not extend beyond human flesh. There are texts which may imply the contrary.

Whether that is so or not, the point is that we should not introduce our own prejudgement. The Bible says 'all flesh'. Leave it at that. God will reveal to us in His time what precisely it means.

'Translation should sound as clear and natural to the contemporary reader as the original sounded to the original readers.'[27] Where possible, yes, but not at the expense of not precisely conveying the sense, even where so far as we as yet know, a bit of a paraphrase may not seem to matter. For example, 'describe' is not precisely the same as 'set it forth' [28] nor is 'gives a revelation to people' precisely the same as 'opens the ears of men' [29]

Wherever possible, translators should not depart even by what appears at present to be an unimportant jot or tittle from what, as Professor Fee himself says, is (in whatever sense we understand this) God's word. 'This is especially sobering when we consider this is God's inspired Word – his message to humanity.'[30]

There is a spectrum of translations available to the Bible reader from what are termed formal to functional with some in the middle trying to hold a balance between the two. The 'formal' are those which try to be as literal as possible; the functional those which attach importance to the English being readily understandable. But this is not a question of black and white

This is illustrated on pages 52 to 54. There Professor Fee gives an impressive list of 47 occasions where the Greek uses a word which basically means 'make' but where it is suggested that the appropriate English idiom never uses 'make'. He comments that 'the literal translator recognises that *poieo* often does not mean "make", but still argues that, as much as possible, the same English

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[25] Op.cit. P.22
[26] Luke 3.6
[27] Fee p.26
[28] Op.cit. P.21
[29] Op.cit. P.64
[30] Op.cit. P.40

word should be used for each word in Hebrew and Greek' This gives the impression that the 'literal' translators have insisted on using 'make' in many or most of these 47 instances. But even in the language of 500 years ago, that most literal-inclined version, the King James, did so in only 5 of the 47 quoted texts. The two ends of the literal/functional spectrum are not chalk and cheese.

Rather it is a matter of emphasis. Even taking examples almost solely from Professor Fee's own book, the analysis above has shown how this in practice leads to instances where the translation is in danger of being either wrong (e.g. where there is another possible interpretation of what the original means) or incomplete (because it leaves out a part of the meaning of the original.)

'A message is of no use unless it is actually understood. All translation should be meaningful translation.'[31] Obviously where possible (as it usually is), this should be so. The error lies in making it the overriding objective. (The only exception allowed is when 'a text is intentionally ambiguous, in which case the translation should seek to retain the same measure of ambiguity as the original.'[32]). But the overriding objective should be to be faithful to the original. Conveying the message intelligibly by the translation is secondary to that. If the only translation available is not wholly right, it is better that wording which is accurate or more nearly so, even where not readily understandable, should be used.

Footnotes are helpful in such cases but are not always used by the translators and where they are used, not always read. The accepted policy makes a point of targeting the intended audience, but in most cases the audience is one which does not look beyond a helpfully (but unknown to the reader misleadingly) clear text. Indeed, footnotes areeven less likely to be read if the translation is in clearly meaningful English than if it is obscure and obviously needing clarification.

In the context of cultural issues, 'readers are expected to acquire this kind of general background knowledge by reading through the Bible or from outside sources such as sermons, notes in a study Bible, commentaries, Bible dictionaries or Bible encyclopedias'.[33] If it is accepted that the reader must do this for the relatively less important matter of understanding the cultural references of the time when the Bible books were written, why may he or she not have to do so for other words in the Bible text which are not self-explanatory?

Whenever we read a book – any book - and come across a word which we don't know, we know that we should look it up or ask what it means (even if most of us do not always do so). Similarly, but even more importantly, we do not expect when reading the Bible to know every word or concept we meet there. It comes as a surprise to almost no-one to come across words or

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[31] Op.cit. P.30
[32] Op.cit. P.38
[33] Op.cit. P.88

concepts which clearly need further explanation. The Eskimo and the rest of us need to be given what the Bible actually says, and then the onus is on us to find out what that means or rely on what our teachers tell us.

Often the reader won't take the trouble. But at least he or she is on notice that there is something which needs clarification. Better this than a seemingly clear text which is actually not in some degree (or even at all) what the Bible says.

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