Understanding English Bible Translation

THE CASE FOR AN ESSENTIALLY LITERAL APPROACH

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Questions and Answers about English Bible Translation

THE ISSUES SURROUNDING English Bible translation are complex. Much of the writing on the subject is so technical that laypeople might well despair of ever understanding the process. In this chapter I will clarify matters by asking and answering a series of questions that frequently surface in regard to English Bible translation. In answering the questions in my own voice, I have pictured myself as responding to questions posed by an interviewer.

1) *Isn't all translation interpretation? If so, aren't essentially literal and dynamic equivalent translations basically the same?*

The favorite motto of dynamic equivalent translators is that "all translation is interpretation." The statement is so misleading that an immediate moratorium should be called on its use.

There is only one sense in which *all* translation is interpretation, and it is not what dynamic equivalent translators usually mean by their cliché. All translation is *lexical or linguistic* interpretation. That is, translators must decide what English word or

phrase most closely corresponds to a given word of the original text. I myself do not believe that "interpretation" is the best word by which to name this process, but inasmuch as it requires a "judgment call" on the part of translators, there is something *akin to* interpretation when translators decide whether, for example, the Israelites were led through the wilderness or the desert.

All translation is "interpretation" on the lexical level. But this is the least of what excites dynamic equivalent translators. In fact, they are often impatient with finding the right corresponding word and eager to interpret the meaning of a word or phrase for the allegedly ignorant modern reader.

2) *What do dynamic equivalent translators primarily mean when they speak of all translation being interpretation?*

They primarily mean interpretation of the content of a statement—in other words, exegesis and commentary. For example, *lexical* interpretation of Psalm 23:5b yields the translation "you anoint my head with oil." A typical move by dynamic equivalent translators is to translate that statement as "you welcome me as an honored guest" (GNB). What I have labeled lexical interpretation has actually been bypassed in the second rendition, since the translators who produced it make no claim that the words *honored guest* appear in the original poem. The translators have interpreted the metaphoric meaning of the image of the anointed head. The two types of interpretation that I have noted belong to different realms and cannot accurately be placed on the same continuum.

3) *What's so objectionable about the motto "all translation is interpretation"?*

It is objectionable because its effect is to conceal a basic difference that exists between the rival translation philosophies. The sleight of hand that dynamic equivalent translations hope to perform with their cliché "all translation is interpretation" is to conceal the irreconcilable divergence that exists between retaining the words of the original and substituting an interpretation of meaning in place of those words. The hoped-for effect of the

motto is to imply something like the following: "See—all translation is interpretation, and the liberties that dynamic equivalent translators take with the original are just part of the normal work of translation."

Well, those liberties are *not* a necessary part of translation. Dynamic equivalence introduced a new type of interpretation into the translation process—a type that essentially literal translators regard as license. To remove the imagery of the statement "he who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:4, ESV and others) and replace it with the statement "those who do right for the right reasons" (CEV) is to do something with the text that was never regarded as normal translation practice until the appearance of dynamic equivalence. All translation is emphatically *not* interpretation as we find it in the second translation quoted above.

4) *Are the labels "dynamic equivalence" and "functional equivalence" good descriptors?*

No; they are as misleading as the motto "all translation is interpretation." The newer term *functional equivalence* is even more deceptive than its predecessor, and it is no wonder that enthusiasts for that approach have latched onto the new label.

Both labels name a process of finding an equivalent in the receptor language for a statement composed in the donor or native language. Functional equivalence seeks something in the receptor language that produces the same *effect* (and therefore allegedly serves the same *function*) as the original statement, no matter how far removed the new statement might be from the original.

For example, in searching for a metaphor to express how delightful he finds God's law, the poet in Psalm 19:10 landed on "sweeter also than honey / and drippings from the honeycomb" (most translations). A dynamic equivalent translator asks, now what does someone in modern Western society find as tasteful as the ancient poet found honey to be? What in modern experience serves the same *function* as honey in the category of "something that tastes sweet?" One translator's answer: "You'll like it better than strawberries in spring, / better than red, ripe strawberries" (MESSAGE).

In slight contrast, *dynamic equivalence* widens the scope beyond functional equivalence. Dynamic equivalence is not primarily interested in corresponding *effect*. Instead, dynamic equivalence is interested in finding equivalent *words or expressions* for the original even while departing from the terms used by the biblical author. For example, if the original says "Lord of hosts," dynamic equivalent translators judge that "Lord Almighty" is an adequate lexical equivalent for the original. If the original says "the hearts of the people melted and became as/like water" (all translations that render Joshua 7:5 literally), the other philosophy thinks that a suitable equivalent of the metaphor is "the Israelite army felt discouraged" (CEV) or "the Israelites . . . lost their courage" (NCV) or "their courage melted away" (NLT).

5) *What makes the labels "dynamic equivalence" and "functional equivalence" objectionable?*

Those labels cover only a fraction of what the translators actually do during the process of translation. Correspondingly, the activities that fall into these two categories constitute a relatively small part of what I discuss in this book. Dynamic equivalent translators smuggle in a huge agenda of further activities that have little to do with finding an equivalent for something in the original text. Here is a list of activities that make up the major portion of what dynamic equivalent translators do:

- make the style of the English Bible as contemporary and colloquial (or nearly so) as it is possible to make it;
- change figurative language into direct statement;
- add interpretive commentary in an attempt to make the Bible immediately understandable to a modern reader;
- replace theological vocabulary with everyday vocabulary (true of some but not all dynamic equivalent translations);
- reduce the vocabulary level of the original and of traditional English translations;

- shorten the syntax of the original and/or traditional English translations;
- bring masculine gender references into line with modern feminist preferences.

Very little of the process I have just described involves finding equivalent terminology or "functions" for the original text. My objection to the labels *dynamic equivalence* and *functional equivalence*, therefore, is that they are misleading and deceptive as descriptors of the phenomenon that they are designed to name.

6) *Is the claim true that essentially literal translation is no more than transliteration?*

The claim was made in print by Mark Strauss in a review of my earlier book.[1] (Strauss coauthored a book that makes the opposite claim that all translation—even literal translation—is a form of paraphrase.[2]) A transliteration of Psalm 32:1 reads, "Blessedness of forgiven of transgression, covered of sin." An essentially literal translation is totally different: "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." The charge that essentially literal translators "forget that [the process involves] translation rather than transcription" should be labeled for what it is—frivolous and irresponsible.[3]

7) *Is it true that linguistic theory has made it obsolete to speak of the difference between what the original text "says" and what it "means?"*

No, linguistics has not proven that. The only kernel of truth in the statement is that meaning is ordinarily embodied not in individual words but in more complex word combinations such as phrases, clauses, and sentences. The exception would be in a one-word communication, where the single word embodies the meaning.

The attempt to discredit the distinction between what a passage in the Bible says and what it means is yet another way in which dynamic equivalent translators attempt to phrase the issues

in such a way as to make it appear that all translation is really a version of dynamic equivalence. To clarify the matter, we can compare the two columns in Chart 2.1. The left column translates the words of the original into English, while the right substitutes something in place of the words of the original.

Chart 2:1 What a Text Says vs. What It Means

"my joy and crown" (Phil. 4:1)	"how happy you make me, and how proud I am of you" (GNB)
"the keepers of the house tremble" (Eccl. 12:3)	"your body will grow feeble" (CEV); or "your limbs will tremble with age" (NLT)
"set a guard . . . over my mouth" (Ps. 141:3)	"take control of what I say" (NLT); or "help me control my tongue" (NCV)

It does not take the proverbial rocket scientist to see that the left column gives us what the original text says: *crown, keepers of the house, guard*. It is equally clear what the original does *not* say: *happy, proud, body, limbs, grow feeble, control, what I say*. Well, then, what do the terms used in the right column represent? They are translators' interpretations of the *meanings* of the words and/or statements in the right column.

The commonsense distinction between what a passage *says* and what it *means* is completely valid, and we should not allow the high-flown technical jargon of linguistics deter us from seeing what is plain to us. The relevance of this to Bible translation is that essentially literal translations give us what the original text *says* (to the extent that translation into English allows), while dynamic equivalent translations regularly remove what the original text says in deference to an interpretation of what it *means*. As biblical scholar Raymond Van Leeuwen states, "It is hard to know what the Bible *means* when we are uncertain about what it *says*."[4]

In making the distinction between what a text says and what it means, I need to guard against leaving the impression that what a text says is not laden with meaning. I am talking about what a translation committee puts before its readers. Essentially literal translators expect readers to determine the meanings that

are present in what the original text says. Dynamic equivalent translators sometimes sneer at essentially literal translations as being unconcerned with meaning. The issue rather is that essentially literal translations expect readers to do what the original authors expected them to do—ascertain the meaning from the data that the original text provides.

8) *What is the most commendable thing that can be said about dynamic equivalent translations?*

The most commendable thing is the goal of the translators to render the Bible understandable to modern readers. We need to give credit where credit is due: dynamic equivalent translators want readers to understand the content of the Bible.

9) *Isn't that a sufficient reason to endorse dynamic equivalent translation?*

It is not. The goal of being immediately understandable to a modern reader is inevitably in competition with other goals. Another way of saying this is that dynamic equivalence comes laden with problems that offset the exemplary goal of being easily understandable to a modern reader.

To begin, the readily understandable text is often not even what the Bible says. As the era of dynamic equivalence continues to unfold, the Bible-reading public is farther and farther removed from the biblical text. Many regular Bible readers do not know what the original text of the Bible says because they have used a translation that shields them from encountering what the original text says. They have accepted a substitute. Of course these readers do not know this. They *think* that Luke 1:69 reads, "He has sent us a mighty Savior" (NLT), whereas it actually reads, "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us" (literal translations).

In many quarters, readability has been elevated to an importance that it should never be accorded. What good is readability if the result is not what the biblical writers said?

10) *What is the most objectionable aspect of dynamic equivalence as a method of Bible translation?*

There are actually two "strongest" cases against dynamic equivalence. The first is the syndrome of variability among translations and the destabilized text that results. When a dynamic equivalent translator shows us just his or her preferred translation, the case is so plausible that it seems perverse to object to it. But problems set in when we start comparing that preferred translation to other things.

The first of these things is what the original text of the Bible actually says. If a dynamic equivalent translation differs from the original text (as it often does), we have a problem with accuracy. The second broader context that is often damning for dynamic equivalence is the variation that exists within the dynamic equivalent family of translations.

Psalm 78:33 can serve as an illustration. Suppose we read the first line of that verse in the NLT: "So he ended their lives in failure." That would seem to be innocuous. But suppose we want to make sure that this is what the original text says. If we consult English Bibles that give us that, we have every reason to be worried. What the poet said was that God ended the days of the wicked "like a breath [or vapor]" (ESV, AMP). Well, which is it—"in failure" or "like a breath"? In a situation like this, a reader *ought* to be able to trust a translation to give us an English version of what the original author wrote.

If, in turn, we consult other translations, we find our problem multiplied: "cut their lives short" (CEV); "in futility" (NIV, NASB, NKJV); "come to nothing" (NLV); "in calamity" (NEB); "in emptiness" (REB). *Failure, futility, emptiness, calamity, cut short*—I myself cannot conceive of how someone can look at such variability and conclude that it is an acceptable state of affairs for Bible translation. There are two problems here: (1) most of the translations do not give us the original author's image of breath or vapor, and (2) what they substitute in place of it is contradictory to other translations, not all of which can be accurate.

The variability that I have noted gives the lie to a dynamic equivalent argument that seems plausible until we look at it more closely. Dynamic equivalent translators feel entitled to change what the biblical authors wrote because they know more than most Bible readers know. As Eugene Nida put it, "The average reader is usually much less capable of making correct judgments . . . than is the translator, who can make use of the best scholarly judgments."[5] But the experts' superior scholarship does us absolutely no good when it comes to producing a reliable translation if the experts cannot agree among themselves as to what the original text means!

11) *What is the other major case against dynamic equivalence?*

It is that in the overwhelming number of cases where dynamic equivalent translators change what the biblical authors wrote, *the authors of the Bible could have phrased it that way* but did not. The writer of Ecclesiastes had the resources to say "your teeth will decay" (Eccl. 12:3, CEV), but instead he wrote, "The grinders cease because they are few." Amos could have said, "I gave you empty stomachs in every city" (Amos 4:6, NIV) or "hunger" (NLT), but instead he said "cleanness of teeth" (literal translation).

Dynamic equivalent translators do not set out to be arrogant vis-à-vis the authors of the Bible, but we need to be forthright. In their actual practices, dynamic equivalent translators show that they think they can do a better job of communicating God's message than the original authors did. When translators remove a biblical author's metaphor, in that very act they show that they believe the biblical author did not "get it right": the author used a metaphor and should not have. When translators add interpretive commentary to what the original text says, they show that they believe the biblical author should have done more than he did. Whatever we might call this, it is not humility before the biblical authors and text.

Neither do dynamic equivalent translators show humility toward their readers. I am offended anew every time I read the statement in the preface to the NIV that "for most readers today" the

phrases *the Lord of hosts* and *God of hosts* "have little meaning." I find those two epithets for God hugely evocative. But even if I did not, it is presumptuous for a translation committee to decide whether something in the Bible is meaningful for a reader.

12) *Does any usefulness remain for dynamic equivalent translations*?

Yes. I use them as commentaries instead of translations. When I explicate a text, I first consult the ESV, then the NASB, then the NKJV. Those translations give me confidence that I know what the original says. If I find a given statement difficult to understand, I have a look at dynamic equivalent translations to get a feel for what the text might mean. Sometimes the dynamic equivalent translations are in general agreement, and sometimes they differ widely. But this degree of variance is what I am likely to find among commentators, too, so I do not find the variance unsettling if I put the translations into the category of commentaries, whereas that same range is very unsettling to me if I am looking for a *translation* that is supposed to inform me of what the original actually says.

I sometimes encounter the viewpoint that when a dynamic equivalent translation offers a good interpretation of a biblical passage, it has been "a good translation" in that particular instance. This is an incorrect verdict; it has been a good *commentary* in that instance. To the extent that the translation has prevented a reader from seeing what the biblical author actually wrote, it has been a bad *translation*.

13) *Is it possible to highlight the differences between the rival translation philosophies at a glance?*

Chart 2.2 names the points on which the two kinds of translation differ and then gives an illustration of the difference. The left column gives essentially literal renditions, while the right column illustrates dynamic equivalence. Since I want the emphasis to fall on the *type* of translation, I have not given the specific translations from which my examples come.

Chart 2.2 How the Rival Translation Philosophies Differ

1) Fidelity to the words of the original vs. feeling free to substitute something in place of those words (Ps. 90:17):	
"Establish the work of our hands upon us." (What the verse actually says.)	"Give us success in what we do"; or "Let all go well for us."
2) Limiting the process of translation to translating the words of the original vs. adding explanatory commentary beyond what the original authors wrote (Ps. 23:5):	
"You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows."	"*You honor me* by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows *with blessings*." (Italics show what the translators have added to the biblical text.)
3) Retaining the concrete vocabulary of the original vs. replacing the concretion with an abstraction (Luke 22:42):	
"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me."	"Father, if it can be done, take away what must happen to Me."
4) Retaining a figure of speech in the original vs. removing a figure of speech (Col. 3:9):	
"Seeing you have put off the old self . . . and put on the new self." (Garment metaphor retained.)	"You have left your old sinful life . . . and begun to live the new life." (Garment metaphor removed.)
5) Passing on to the reader the ambiguity/multiple meanings of the original vs. resolving the ambiguity/multiplicity in a single direction (2 Thess. 3:5):	
"The love of God . . ." (Can be both the believer's love for God and God's love for the believer.)	"God's love . . ." (The double meanings reduced to one.)
6) Producing a relatively high level of vocabulary and syntax vs. producing a simplified level of vocabulary and syntax (Eccl. 3:11–12):	
"He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."	"God makes everything happen at the right time. Yet none of us can ever fully understand all he has done, and he puts questions in our minds about the past and the future."
7) Producing an English Bible that possesses a dignified and relatively formal style vs. producing a colloquial Bible (Eccl. 11:9):	
"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes."	"Young people, it's wonderful to be young! Enjoy every minute of it. Do everything you want to do; take it all in."
8) Retaining traditional theological vocabulary vs. avoiding traditional theological vocabulary (1 Tim. 2:6):	
"Who gave himself as a ransom for all."	"He gave his life to set all men free."