

An American Translation (AAT) – A Review and Evaluation

A Brief History of the AAT

In the 1930's and 40's, William Beck began to prepare translations of parts of the New Testament while serving as a Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) pastor in Iowa. He realized that even his Sunday School teachers at times were having a difficult time using the King James Version. So he set about to give his teachers and their students a simpler text to use in their Sunday School lessons.

In the late 1950's Dr. Beck started teaching courses at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and continued working at translating parts of the New Testament. In 1959 he published *The Christ of the Gospels* which was a translation of Gospel texts in the form of a harmony. Concordia Publishing House published Beck's version of the entire New Testament in 1963 (*An American Translation—The New Testament in the Language of Today*).

At the time of his death in 1966, Dr. Beck had also completed a first draft of a translation of the Old Testament. His work was turned over to two men to make the manuscript ready for publishing. Elmer Smick (Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary) and Erich Kiehl (Concordia Seminary: St. Louis) made some revisions of Beck's draft. Then the Old Testament was published together with the New in 1976 as a complete Bible (*An American Translation*) by Leader Publishing Company of New Haven, Missouri.

In this first edition of the AAT, revisions of the New Testament were also made to address concerns expressed by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations. A second and third edition of AAT contained revisions made by Dr. Phillip Giessler and Herman Otten. (See the section below on *An Overview of the Four Editions of AAT*). Otten was a good friend and student of Beck, and a Lutheran pastor in New Haven, MO. Giessler was also a student and good friend of Dr. Beck. He served as an LCMS pastor in Cleveland, OH, and taught classes on occasion at Concordia Seminary in Ft. Wayne, IN.

In the mid-1980's, Giessler gathered a small group of pastors and professors at New Haven, MO, to discuss the need for further revisions of AAT. Prof. Siegbert Becker of WELS was invited to this meeting. Suggestions for revision of the AAT were solicited prior to this meeting from numerous LCMS, WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod), and ELS (Evangelical Lutheran Synod) pastors, professors, teachers, and lay people. The upshot of this meeting was a decision to begin a major revision of AAT.

Dr. Giessler headed an editorial committee of three (P. Giessler, D. Kuske, R. Hoerber) who reviewed the large number of suggested revisions that were submitted. The committee incorporated many of these suggestions into a revision of the AAT New Testament which was given the title *God's Word to the Nations* (GWN) and published in 1988. Suggestions for improvement of the GWN were encouraged, and the editorial committee added many of them when the GWN was renamed and published as the *New Evangelical Translation* (NET) in 1990.

Sales from the GWN/NET New Testament along with generous gifts and grants enabled Dr. Giessler to establish a translation center in Cleveland. A number of people were engaged to work on a revision of the AAT Old Testament with the goal of publishing a complete NET Bible. However, when Giessler resigned his position as director of this work, a new director was brought in who took the work in a different direction. Instead of continuing work on an Old Testament NET as a revision of AAT, the decision was made to assemble a team of scholars and

stylists at the Cleveland translation center to produce a translation of the Bible that was independent of the AAT. This translation was published in 1995 and named *GOD'S WORD*.

The rights to the New Testament NET were eventually returned to the Beck family, but no further work was done to develop an Old Testament NET translation. Instead, a fourth edition of the AAT was subsequently published in 2000 by Leader Publishing Company of New Haven, MO. Dr. John Drickamer, Reu Beck, and Herman Otten evaluated the suggestions for improvement that were submitted for the fourth edition. A revision of the fourth edition was finished in 2010. The changes made in the revised fourth edition of the AAT took place under the supervision of Tim and Beth Otten, and Reu and JoAnn Beck.

An Overview of the Four Editions of AAT

Dr. Beck's goals in translating were: 1) A Bible that was faithful to the meaning expressed in the original languages; and 2) A Bible that expressed this meaning in the everyday language of people today. Dr. Beck is often quoted as saying that the language spoken in Jesus' day was the sort of language people use while drinking coffee and eating doughnuts. In his Preface to *The New Testament in the Language of Today* Beck writes, "If Jesus came into our homes today, how would He talk? Just as we talk to one another. He would take the words out of our lives and put heaven's meaning into them (page *viii*). . . . Today he would talk a language that is direct and forceful . . . that is fresh and simple. . . . When we let God speak the living language of today a reader can get into the spirit of the words to the point where the printed book seems to vanish and he hears the truth fresh from the lips of God (page *ix*)." Perhaps Beck's goal is best expressed by this comment included in the Preface to the third edition, "My goal is to have God talk to the hearts of people in their language of today and tomorrow. In this direction I go farther than any other translation (page *viii*)."

Some critics of the AAT would say Beck went too far in this direction. For example Zane Hodges writes the following in a critique of the AAT (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/beck.html>). "The text is full of the clichés, contractions, and elisions of colloquial speech, in keeping with Beck's idea that the words of the New Testament authors were utterly casual in tone. . . . This idea about the style of the New Testament was in vogue among American scholars during the 1930's and 40's, but by 1960 it had been abandoned by most. In any case, it seems inappropriate to picture Jesus holding a doughnut as he says, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,' or a cup of coffee as he says, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega.' There is something peculiarly tactless about this attempt to give a conversational tone to the discourses of Christ and his apostles, which are anything *but* casual. Beck maintains that 'when we let God speak the living language of today . . . a reader can instantly get into the spirit of the words.' But the spirit of the words is betrayed when Christ is made to talk like our chum."

There were also criticisms that the first edition of the AAT was not always accurate or faithful to the thought of the original text. Hodges quotes a review published in 1964: "The translator has evidently accepted a fallacy which more than one modern version displays, namely, that precision in presenting the thought of the original can be—or ought to be—sacrificed in the interests of clarity and readability. . . . A doctrinal passage like Romans 7 and 8 is found to be honeycombed with interpretative renderings, some quite misleading. In Colossians 2:10 the rich phrase *kai este en auto pepleromenoi* becomes almost colloquial with the rendering, 'And in Him . . . you have a full life.' And so on, for examples like these can be found on almost any page. . . . There is produced thereby a version interesting enough to be read through by those seeking fresh insights, but not sufficiently accurate to be read often or studied intensively."

Among the suggestions for revisions of the first edition of the AAT were those submitted by numerous faculty members of the Concordia seminaries in Ft. Wayne, IN, and St. Louis, MO : Walter Maier, Jr., Robert Preus, Martin Scharlemann, Raymond Surburg, James Voelz, Harold Buls, G. Waldemar Degner, Robert Hoerber, and Horace Hummel.

In the Preface to the second and third editions, Dr. Phillip Giessler notes the major revisions that were made:

1. Some revisions that Smick and Kiehl made of Beck's OT manuscript were changed to correspond to the latter.
2. Sentence structures were altered in various ways for various reasons, including the necessity of minor changes for reasons of memorization or greater ease of understanding.
3. In numerous places, Beck's translation of *charis* as "love" was changed to "grace." Giessler comments on this change to this effect:
Beck would argue that "grace" is not understood by the average layman. On the other hand, many argue that "love" is not rich enough for *charis*, and that translating *charis* with "love" fails to differentiate between it and the Greek word *agape* which means "love." We chose to honor both opinions as far as possible. In some instances "grace" was substituted for "love," whereas "love" was retained in instances where the expression "the gift of love" appears since the word "gift" implies something that is unearned. In a few instances "undeserved love" was used.
4. In some cases the translation "happy" for *makarios* was changed to "blessed" (e.g. in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 to avoid a translation such as "Happy are those who mourn" in v. 5).
5. The translation "become righteous" was changed to "justified" in five passages (e.g. Romans 3:24, 5:1). Beck had not used "justify" in the first edition because he felt the church was fighting a losing battle in trying to communicate in the language of today with that term.
N.B. Beck's translation "make righteous" (e.g. Romans 3:20, 26, 30) was not changed until the fourth edition.
6. "Only begotten" replaced Beck's use of "only" in John's writings and Psalm 2:7 and its New Testament quotes, and "parables" was substituted for "stories."

In the fourth edition quite a few changes were made to address the criticisms that had been leveled against the earlier editions. Sentence structures were changed to make the text more readable, "make righteous" was changed to "declare righteous," Colossians 2:10 was changed to read "and in him . . . you are complete," Romans 7 and 8 were made less interpretive, etc. See Appendix 2 for three samples of side-by-side portions of the AAT which illustrate the extensive revisions made from the third to the fourth edition.

The length of some sentences remains a problem in some parts of the fourth edition. Experts tell us that any sentence that runs on for more than 15 to 20 words doesn't communicate well in our day. This is true for quite a few laypeople, and it is even more true for children and those for whom English is not their first language. In 1 Peter 1 of the AAT alone, there are four sentences that are 25 to 32 words long, two that are 56, and one that runs on for 72 words. It's not always easy to convert the long sentences in Greek into shorter English sentences. But it's worth the effort to do so for the sake of clarity and for the sake of the contemporary Bible reader's understanding. Some might argue that one must reflect the more complex literary style of some of the inspired writers in translation. But one is not undermining the inspiration of Scripture if the meaning of an inspired writer's words is reflected well in another language. Above all else, the meaning of what was written must be retained, but not necessarily the writing style.

In response to a letter from the writer of this article to Reu Beck about the revisions of the fourth edition made in 2010, Reu indicated that there were a number of goals. The changes did not affect the AAT text a great deal but were directed more to items like these:

- 1) Correction of typos found in the fourth edition,
- 2) Completion of the cross references from one testament to the other,
- 3) Reduction of preface and appendix material, and
- 4) Improvement of the clarity of map structure.

Evaluation

Solomon's words—"of making many books there is no end" (Ecclesiastes 12:12)—might also be applied to Bible translations. In the past century the number of whole Bible or New Testament translations increased significantly from one part of the century to the next. About 20 English translations were published from 1900 to 1930, 40 more from 1930 to 1965, and 60 more from 1965 to 2000. It can be said that almost every denomination or group of denominations has produced its own translation. In light of this fact, the AAT needs to be evaluated as to its place in this torrent of translations and as to its comparative value.

Is the AAT a translation that will serve a Lutheran church body well for use in its publications and public worship? Questions such as these need to be asked: Is the AAT good for public reading such as the Sunday lections used in Lutheran worship services? Many will answer, "Yes"; many others will answer "No" (See the "Comparative Study of Bible Translations" in Appendix 1). Is the AAT accurate enough to serve well in catechetical instruction of youth and adults? Some will answer, "Yes"; others will answer, "Not always." Will it serve well for use for sermon texts? The answer is: "In many cases, yes; in some cases, no."

A Lutheran church will want a translation for use in its publications and public worship that is both eminently readable and very accurate. If a church can't find such a translation—or can't produce a translation that has both of these qualities—then that church might settle for a translation such as the AAT. The argument would be made that one would sacrifice readability a bit for the sake of accuracy—rather than the other way around.

The AAT certainly can be commended to Lutheran lay people for use in their private devotions because of its accuracy and informal style. But, even with the improvements that have been made in the fourth edition, not all will agree that it would serve without shortcomings in Lutheran publications or Lutheran public worship.

David Kuske (April, 2011)

[Attached as Appendices 3 + 4 by the WELS Translation Evaluation Committee are two articles by William Beck in which he describes his translation philosophy.]

Appendix 1

What follows is a paragraph taken from the document titled “Comparative Study of Bible Translations” which was prepared by the Commission of Worship of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in 2002.

N. B. Example 27 refers to Psalm 8:4-6, example 38 to 1 Peter 3:21, example 39 to Exodus 20:8, and example 40 to Numbers 6:24-26.

An American Translation (AAT)

In 1976, the translation of William Beck, professor at Concordia Seminary, was privately published. It was followed by later revisions, most recently the fourth edition in 2000. Intended as a Lutheran translation of the Bible, the AAT aims for a readable style in simple English. Unfortunately, easy readability comes at a price, namely, a casual and colloquial style that may not be elegant enough for public reading. For example, it regularly uses contractions (I’m, can’t, etc.). In many respects the AAT is an accurate translation. Sometimes it offers the best rendering (example 16). It is, however, also an idiosyncratic translation, and occasionally offers less accurate renderings (examples 27, 38, 39, 40).

Appendix 2

Following are passages or selected verses arranged side by side to illustrate the changes made from the third edition to the fourth edition of the AAT. The words and phrases underlined and italicized in the third edition excerpts were revised in the fourth edition.

<i>Isaiah 53:1-6 (third edition)</i>	<i>Isaiah 53:1-6 (fourth edition)</i>
<p>1 Who <u>could believe</u> what we <u>have heard</u>? And to whom has the LORD’s mighty working been revealed?</p>	<p>1 Who has believed what we told them? And to whom has the LORD’s mighty working been revealed?</p>
<p>2 He grew up before Him like a shoot from a stock, like a sprout from a root in dry ground. And when we saw Him, He had no form or beauty to make us <u>want Him</u>, or pleasing <u>looks</u> to make us delight in Him.</p>	<p>2 He grew up before Him like a shoot from a stock, like a sprout from a root in dry ground. And when we saw Him, He had no form or beauty to make us want to look at Him; or pleasing appearance to make us delight in Him.</p>
<p>3 He was despised, forsaken by men, a man of sorrows who knew suffering. People covered their faces so as not to see Him, He was despised, and we thought nothing of Him.</p>	<p>3 He was despised, forsaken by men, a man of sorrows who knew suffering. People covered their faces so as not to see Him; He was despised and we thought nothing of Him.</p>
<p>4 But surely He has taken on Himself our <u>sickness</u> and carried our sorrows, but we observed that God had stricken, smitten, and afflicted Him.</p>	<p>4 Surely He has taken on Himself our suffering and carried our sorrows, but we observed that God had stricken, smitten, and afflicted Him.</p>
<p>5 And certainly He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our sins. By His punishment, we were saved and by His wounds we were healed.</p>	<p>5 And certainly He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our sins; By His punishment we were saved and by His wounds we were healed.</p>
<p>6. We have all gone astray like sheep. Every one of us has <u>gone</u> his own way, and the LORD has punished Him for the sins of us all.</p>	<p>6 We have all gone astray like sheep. Every one of us has turned to go his own way, and the LORD has punished Him for the sins of us all.</p>

<i>Matthew (Third Edition)</i>	<i>Matthew (Fourth Edition)</i>
3:3 <u>Someone</u> will be calling in the wilderness . . .	3:3 A voice will be calling in the wilderness . . .
4:14 what <u>the prophet said</u> . . .	4:14 what was said through the prophet Isaiah . . .
6:12 as we <u>have forgiven</u> . . .	6:12 as we forgive . . .
6:33 <u>Strive above all to live under God's rule and according to his righteousness, and you'll get all these other things too.</u>	6:33 Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you, too.
9:13 I <u>like</u> mercy . . .	9:13 I want mercy . . .
10:23 <u>Let me assure you</u> . . .	10:23 I tell you the truth . . .
11:16 of this <u>age</u> . . .	11:16 of this generation . . .
18:20 where two or three <u>come together with Me</u> . . .	18:20 where two or three have been brought together in My name . . .
26:28 This is my blood of the <u>covenant</u> . . .	26:28 This is my blood of the New Testament . . .
26:52 All who take the sword <u>must</u> die by the sword.	26:52 All who take the sword will die by the sword.
28:19 <u>Go and make disciples of all people: Baptize</u> them . . .	28:19 Therefore, wherever you go disciple all nations, baptizing them . . .

<i>Romans 3:19 – 26, 4:1-5 (Third Edition)</i>	<i>Romans 3:19-26, 4:1-5 (Fourth Edition)</i>
3:19 We know that everything the Law says it says to those who are under the Law so that <u>nobody can say anything</u> and the whole world <u>must let God judge it</u> .	3:19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may stand guilty before God.
3:20 <u>What anyone does to keep the Law will not make him</u> righteous before God, because the Law <u>shows us our sins</u> .	3:20 Therefore not one person will be declared righteous before God by doing what the Law says, because the Law teaches us to recognize sin.
3:21 But now God has shown us His righteousness; the Law and the <u>prophets</u> tell about it, but it is <u>without the Law</u> .	3:21 But now God has shown us His righteousness apart from the Law. The Law and the Prophets tell about it.
3:22 <u>God's righteousness comes</u> to all who believe <u>just by their believing</u> in Jesus Christ.	3:22 This righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ comes from God to all who believe.
There is no difference. 3:23 All have sinned and <u>are without</u> God's glory.	There is no difference. 3:23 All have sinned and come short of God's glory.
3:24 They are <u>justified</u> freely by <u>grace</u> , through the ransom Christ Jesus paid to free them.	3:24 They are declared righteous freely by His grace through the ransom Christ Jesus paid to free them.
. . . 3:26 Now he wanted to show his righteousness, to be righteous Himself and <u>make righteous</u> anyone who believes in Jesus.	. . . 3:26 Now he wanted to show His righteousness, to be righteous Himself and to declare righteous anyone who believes in Jesus.
. . . 4:1 What should we say Abraham our natural ancestor found?	. . . 4:1 What should we say Abraham, our natural ancestor, found?
4:2 If he <u>got to be righteous</u> by what he did, he had something to <u>be proud of</u> . But he couldn't <u>feel proud</u> before God.	4:2 If he was declared righteous by what he did, he had something to boast about. But he couldn't boast before God.
4:3 What does the Bible say? <u>Abraham believed God and so was counted righteous</u> .	4:3 What does the Bible say? "Abraham believed God and so he was counted righteous."
4:4 If you work, your pay isn't considered a gift but a debt.	4:4 If you work, your pay isn't considered a gift but a debt.
4:5 But if instead of working you believe in Him <u>who makes</u> the ungodly righteous, your faith is counted as righteousness.	4:5 But if instead of working you believe in Him Who declares the ungodly righteous, your faith is counted as righteousness.

Appendix 3

A Literal Translation

By: William F. Beck

I heard a pastor say in a sermon the Greek word for “Comforter” really ought to be translated “Paraclete.” That’s being loyal to the word *parakleitos*. Then we may perhaps with one version translate the words in John 3:16 with “life eonian.” Or we ought to do what the rabbis do: Read the original text to the people and let a pastor or a commentator explain it. That would be a loyalty to the original text, but it isn’t translation.

The Principle

Some men with a fine loyalty to God’s Word insist that we must translate literally, substituting English words and structures for the Hebrew and Greek originals.

Such men are quick to criticize a rendering that has more words than the original text and to mark it negatively as “paraphrase.” But we should look at our KJ version in Acts 13:11 where it uses seven words to translate one Greek word and in 1 Peter 1:18 where it uses six words to translate one Greek word. Would a rendering necessarily be “paraphrase” if we used ten words for one word in the original? The opposite may not be so sharply criticized. There are instances where a translation can express the meaning in fewer words. In Luke 1:7 five Greek words mean “old.” In Ezekiel 5:9 there are ten Hebrew words that could be accurately translated with two English words, “something unique.” In Ezekiel 8:5 there are five Hebrew words which the RSV translates with eleven English words, “Lift up your eyes now in the direction of the north,” which can be translated with “look north” just as accurately and with more striking power.

One explanation for insisting on a literal translation is that we learn Greek by memorizing *xeir* on the left with “hand” on the right and *krinon* on the left with “lily” on the right. And in our first translations we substitute noun for noun, verb for verb, structure for structure, like so many bricks. Some people never get beyond such a substitution.

But the main reason for insisting on translating literally is a loyalty to the text—this is what we must do if we believe in verbal inspiration. We must be loyal to the words. In the argument words may be contrasted with meaning. A translator is not an interpreter. A translator tells what an author said; an interpreter tells what he meant. Hasn’t the Bible said, “No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20)? A perfect translation to a certain extent disregards meaning. The meaning must be supplied by the pastor and the commentary. Translations which give all the meaning are an inaccurate, loose paraphrase (with a left-handed slur) since they give what the translator thought that the writer meant. They are not the Bible but have something added from the translator’s hand. What cannot be produced by a substitution of words must be left untranslated; if it is translated, it is a defect. Only a literal translation is a translation. It is the Bible.

Let’s try it. We translate, “Abraham, a son of a hundred year” (Genesis 21:5). Immediately the literal translator sees that’s a bit silly. We must say, “Abraham was a son of a hundred year.” But “was” isn’t in the Hebrew text, so we must italicize it. But one fine Bible teacher correctly [*sic*] took the italicized words in his Bible for the most important words and for some years taught his class in that way. What isn’t there was made the most outstanding. Then the literal translator says, “We must put such words in parentheses.” Then we have: “Abraham

(was) a son of a hundred year.” That still isn’t edible. It’s useful for a student of Hebrew. It points out to him piece by piece what the Hebrew text is. But it is no good for ordinary Christians.

Now the literal translator is up against it. “Abraham (was) a son of a hundred year” still doesn’t mean anything. If the literal translator goes a step farther and translates, “Abraham was a hundred years old,” he is abandoning his principle of a literal translation and he is adopting mine. But I believe we must go much farther in carrying out the principle.

The Loss of Meaning

The trouble is that words are not bricks. There are no absolute equivalents in any two languages. Many words have a great variety of meanings, and some of them pass from one shade of meaning to another in a baffling way.

Abraham’s servant put bracelets on Rebekah’s “hands.” If we translate *yad* or *xeir* with “hand,” we’re wrong. Whatever the dictionary says has to be set aside in favor of the context which says that *xeir* means “forearm” and “wrist.” Otherwise we’ll have to say “handwatch” instead of “wristwatch.” It is said that “foot” means everything up to the hips and so can be used as a euphemism for the sexual area. The Song of Solomon says that lips are like “lilies.” Such a context proves that *krinon* wasn’t our white Easter lily but a red flower, probably the red anemone. This gives a different meaning to the words of Jesus, “Look at the lilies” (Luke 12:27). *Shalom* means “peace” but also “welfare” and “friendship.” A good dictionary gives a long column of many varying meanings for each word. The same is true of grammatical structure. The genitive means “of,” but it also stands for many other relations. To insist rigidly on a mechanical substitution of “identical” words, phrases, sentences, and even verbal inflections violates accuracy. Here very definitely consistency is the vice of little minds.

Literal translating has two faults. While it may look accurate, it often fails to give the meaning and it may even give the wrong meaning. A mere substitution of words produces less than the Word of God and even falsifies it. It betrays the meaning.

Let us look at some examples. In Genesis 6:13 we have a very simple wording: “The end of all flesh is come before Me.” No reader can get the real meaning from this literal translation. The meaning is: “I have decided that everybody must die.” “I am the God of Bethel” (Genesis 31:43 KJ and RSV) doesn’t mean what it says. He isn’t the God of Bethel but the God of heaven and earth. The text means, “I am the God who appeared to you at Bethel.” No one can guess from the literal rendering of the words, “I see Him, but not now” (Numbers 24:17 KJ and RSV) that it has the clear Messianic meaning. “I see Him” is not correct because he doesn’t see Balaam. He means to say: “I see Him who has not yet come.” The right translation is “I see Him who is not here now.” Any ordinary reader will take “water of impurity” (Numbers 31:23 KJ and RSV) to mean muddy water. It means “water used to cleanse from impurity.” “Hard-hearted” (Ezekiel 3:7) doesn’t mean “cruel” but “stubborn.” “So will we render the calves of our lips” (Hosea 14:2) means “we will praise Him with our lips.” “The exile of Babylon” (Matthew 1:17) means Babylon is exiled. But the meaning is that Israel was taken away into captivity to Babylon. “The body of this death” (Romans 7:24) means “the body that is bringing me to this death” (Twentieth Century). The literal translation of 2 Corinthians 6:11-13 is: “O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open to you, our heart is enlarged. Ye are not straightened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels. Now for a recompense in the same, (I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged.” The meaning is: “We have talked quite freely to you Corinthians. Our hearts are wide open. We are not narrow in our feelings for you but you are narrow toward us. I ask you as my children, treat me as I treat you and open your hearts wide too.” Such examples are found in the KJ and the

RSV versions by the hundreds. They stand in the translated Bible like the branches of an apple tree in the winter.

A serious error has crept into the RSV in Romans 9:22 by way of a literalism. There we have the participle *thelon*, “desiring.” The Greek participle is concessive, “although He desired,” just as it is in Matthew 14:5. The English participle “desiring” cannot express this concessive relation. The sentence, “Desiring to destroy the business, he bought 51% of its stock,” can only mean that he bought the stock in order to destroy the business. So the RSV, which translated the same participle as a concessive in Matthew 14:5 has given us a neat Calvinism in Romans 9:22 merely by translating literally.

The pain of a translator is that no matter how hard he tries, many an innuendo is lost in a translation. “Things originally uttered in Hebrew have not the same force in them when they are translated into another language” (Prolog to Ecclesiasticus). The best rendering is an approximation to the thought of the original, its finer points, and its atmosphere of allusion and emotions. Some of the content never gets across the psychological barrier. But the literal translator loses more than any other because he doesn’t even try to transfer the full meaning of the Hebrew and the Greek into English. He is often contented to convey a vague meaning or no meaning at all.

The Failure of a Literal Translation

The function of words is meaning. When a literal translator fails to convey the meaning, he robs the text of its function. The function of the honeycomb is honey. The literalist carefully tries to preserve the wax while he lets the honey drip out. To the extent in which he fails to give the correct meaning, he fails to give the Word of God. His loyalty to words may not be to the Word of God so much as to certain dictionary meanings of words.

This means that the reader has to get the meaning by himself. But he’s not equipped for that. We hand him a little testament with a big commentary. But a reader shouldn’t have to lug around a lexicon and a commentary to read his New Testament. It’s the translator’s job to give the meaning, not the reader’s.

The most vital criticism of the literal translator is that he deprives a reader of the chance of judging the truth in the text for himself. It makes him depend on the pastor and other books for the correct meaning. God wants a reader to be able to stand on his own feet as he reads His Word.

A literal translator concentrates all his loyalty and effort on words and structures which cannot be transferred and misses thoughts and feelings which can and must be transferred if the Word is to be effective. In the ASV of Ephesians 1:3-14, participial phrases alternate with relative clauses through a sentence of 268 words that convey a minimum of meaning. People are more sensitive than we think to the language we use. If it is awkward, prosaic, it may not be openly denounced but it will be received with apathy. Even if a literal translation in its clumsy way suggests the meaning, it lacks the life, beauty, and force of the original. It brings meaning in a strange and cold form which is far from the hearts of the people whom we much reach. “It fails to bring out the comfort of Christ” which was Luther’s criticism of literal translating.

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Appendix 4

The Translation of Meaning

By: William F. Beck

Structure Cannot Be Transferred

We must face the fact that structure cannot be transferred. Only the function of Hebrew and Greek words can be transferred to English words. The original text and structure not only can be left behind but must be left behind. It can no more serve our purpose when we speak in other languages.

Luther moved from edition to edition away from the literal reproduction of the original text to a really German Bible. He recommended that people use both his earlier translation of the Psalms because they were nearer the Hebrew and his 1531 edition which was more German. Any good translator will grow in the same direction, from an amateurish literalism to a vigorous reproduction of the meaning in the new language.

We must melt down the original structure in order to get the total meaning and reproduce that in the English structure. We can have no honey without wax cells, but to transfer the honey we must melt the wax, separate the wax from the honey, and leave the wax behind. Or to use another picture, the original text is the cup into which God has poured His truth. God does not expect us to drink the cup, but only the wine in the cup. For English people we cannot use the cup of the original text, but we must pour the truth from the gold cup of the original text into the silver cup held by the hands of our people.

Luther's test was "How does a German say it." He had the prophets and apostles move west. "In translating Moses I make him so German that nobody knows he was a Jew," who spoke Hebrew. Today we must produce a Bible in such English that a reader will forget it is a translation. How would an American say it? I believe an American girl would say to Peter in Matthew 26:73: "Sure, you're one of them. Anyone can tell by the way you talk." This is the 100% meaning of the Greek text, but you'll find no reproduction of its structure. It is accurate: Nothing has been added or subtracted from its meaning. Any reader can enter into the spirit of such a writing to the point that the printed book vanishes and he hears the truth fresh from the lips of his God.

What Is Inspired?

If we don't match word for word, are we disloyal to verbal inspiration?

Certainly the words are inspired, and I have no lurking exceptions to that fact in my mind. God wants us to be loyal to every word and form of His text. I'm all out for that kind of "literal" loyalty.

Now let us see what differences we face in translation in regard to inspiration. The literal translator thinks of words as inspired without giving full consideration to the meaning they carry. To think of words as inspired apart from their meaning is a misconception of verbal inspiration. Words are the vehicles of meaning. This meaning doesn't come in words as independent elements but in a series of words in their context. God didn't inspire words as pieces by themselves but in a psychological pattern of meaning. Verbal inspiration means the inspiration of the words plus all

the contextual relations of these words to one another. The whole context is as inspired as the words that carry it. And a violation of this contextual meaning is as much a violation of verbal inspiration as the misrepresentation of a word.

And this contextual meaning, often lost in a literal translation, God wants to transfer into the new language. When I reach into the context for a more precise and clearer meaning than would be conveyed by a mere substitution of words, I'm not adding to the text, I'm not getting something out of my own head; I am digging out of the text what God has put there and has ordered me to tell my readers. I couldn't do less if I wanted to.

Some examples. In Ezekiel 18:12 we read that an Israelite "withdraws his hand from the poor." In English that means he refuses to help him. But in the Hebrew context it means he doesn't hurt him. That meaning must be given in a good translation. Again, a good Israelite "doesn't eat on the hills" (Ezekiel 18:6, 11, 15). He ate on the hills and in the valleys, anywhere he pleased. But "on the hills" meant the sacrifices made at the shrines of the idols on the hills. "I raised My hand" (Ezekiel 20:5, 15) means, "I swore."

Meaning is Primary

This meaning embedded in the words is primary. If we miss it by sticking to certain dictionary meanings of words in spite of the context, we really aren't more loyal to the Word but we disrespect the Word in its function. The essence of the Word of God is not words which as such cannot be transferred or preached but the thought in the words.

The authority for meaning isn't first of all the dictionary but the context. Each word brings to the context a store of meanings on a tray from which the context selects the particular meaning that fits its purpose. Or the context may even alter the meaning of words as we see it in the conversion of the *koine* language to serve the cross of Christ. We see such a power of the context over a word when a little girl comes to her mother and says, "I made a mule without ears." What has the context done to the word "mule"? The lively give-and-take of its context defines the meaning of a word. The dictionary may be errant, but the context is inerrant. And every error we face is corrected by seeing words more exactly in their contextual meaning.

Words are tools—the meaning is everything. Luther said, "The meaning doesn't serve the words, but the words serve the meaning" (St.L. XXIIb:2212-2213). When a literal translation sacrifices meaning to words, it makes the queen serve the maids. The maids should serve the queen.

What does God want? A substitution of English words for Hebrew and Greek words? That isn't what He wants. And that is not translation. And the opposite of literal translation isn't a "free" translation in the sense of an inexact translation but simply translation.

In all my work God is going to talk unhampered by the inadequacies of dictionaries and grammars or other human limitations. I've pledged myself to the whole meaning of the Word.

Three Ways

We need some clear definitions. The real difficulty is that translation and paraphrase are not clearly distinguished in the dictionary or in popular usage. The two terms really mean three different things: Literal rendering, thought translation, and translation plus amplification. All translations are mixtures, in varying proportions, of at least two of these elements, and some

versions have all three. Our terminology would be clear if we could adopt the following distinctions:

	EXAMPLE	DISTINCTIVE FEATURE
Literal rendering	“The love of God is upon you”	Words and grammatical structure are the same as in the original
Thought translation	“God loves you”	“The act of changing thoughts from one language to another” (Winston dictionary)
Paraphrase	“The Holy God loves you”	“Holy” is added to the thought

Paraphrase may help us understand, but it overtranslates. It adds to the text. It borders on commentary. We should not put our ideas into a translation. They can very easily be added without increasing the number of words as we can see in 1 Timothy 3:2 RSV where the three Greek words for “husband of one wife” are translated by three English words, “married only once,” adding the thought “for all one’s life” to the original meaning. Sometimes it may be only an added emphasis. As an illustration compare the following renderings of Acts 17:6:

KJ: “These that have turned the world upside down”
 RSV: “These men who have turned the world upside down”
 Mine: “Those men who have made trouble all over the world”

At some future date somebody is going to compare these passages and argue against mine that it is weaker than that of the KJ and the RSV. The fact is that the KJ and the RSV have overtranslated the Greek verb. I remember checking this point with the sainted Doctor Arndt when he was in the middle of lexicography just before his death, and I still recall how he shook his head: “Upside down” is too strong. I would call such added emphasis paraphrase. And in this case I trust that the weakness of God is stronger than men.

We need some sound paraphrase in telling Bible stories to little children. But it should be excluded from a translation in order to keep the Word of God from becoming the word of the translator. In a paraphrase it is hard to tell where the Bible ends and the translator begins. Paraphrase has a harmful effect on the rapport between the Book and the reader. The reader expects a translation to produce the original meaning faithfully. Suppose a reader asks a question about an element that has been added to the text, however correct that element may be, and we have to tell him, “It isn’t in the original text,” his doubts will carry over into the rest of the text. A translation which cannot invite a 100% trust is not a good translation.

I believe we ought to define translation as the transfer of the thought from one language to another because—

1. Only to the extent in which a literal rendering actually conveys the thought is it a translation.
2. The elements added by a paraphrase are not in the original text and cannot be called translation.
3. We have always called the KJV and Luther’s version, including their non-literal renderings, translations.

4. Luther clearly defined his translation as a surrender of the original form and a reproduction of the thought in the people's language (LW 35:188, 209, 213; St.L. XII:1920-21). His critics said, "Die Meinung hat er getroffen, aber die Worte nicht" ("He has come upon the meaning, but not the words"), and they were correct.
5. The transfer of the thought is the essence of the task.

The Full Meaning

Loyalty to the meaning of the words is no disloyalty to the words any more than loyalty to the purpose of the church is a disloyalty to the church. It is a far more total loyalty to the words because it includes their entire function which the literal translator neglects.

Luther knew he was leaving the original form behind. He was afraid some pious hearts would be offended because he did this in so many places (St.L. IV:126). But he knew he was doing right.

Where the Psalm speaks of a cedar being fat, Luther knew a German would think only of his fat belly. The Psalmist meant by a fat tree a fruitful tree, and so he would translate it. When Mary says (Luke 1:50), "His mercy is for generations and generations," Luther beautifully states it as "his mercy continues forever and forever." Where Paul (Romans 10:10) has a prepositional phrase, "for righteousness" and "for salvation," Luther substitutes a clause, "so wird man gerecht," "so wird man selig"—"then a person becomes righteous," "then a person is saved." Perhaps his freest rendering is in Psalm 90:12 where the Hebrew words say, "to count our days so make us know, and we will bring in a heart of wisdom." Luther: "Teach us to consider that we must die that we may get wise." (Cp. Luther's rendering of Psalm 73:25 and Matthew 12:34).

God's purpose is to convey meaning. The more thoroughly we convey it, the more powerful it will be to save.

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