

# Using the Right Bible Translation?

## A professional translator's perspective on translation choice

By Jonathan Downie

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### Introduction

For church leaders, preachers and even ordinary Christians, choosing a Bible translation can be a difficult task. This is made even more difficult for those who study translation in order to make an informed decision. It is unfortunate that discussions of Bible translations tend to be centred on personal opinions (for example Taylor 2007) or discussions over the techniques used to overcome small-scale linguistic problems (for example Fee and Stuart 2002, Neff 2002 and Hill 2006) rather than on objective facts. However, to be in a position where they can make a truly informed choice, pastors and leaders would need to have some sort of reliable guide as to what they can expect in the translation as a whole. Based on recent translation research and my own professional experience as a translator, this article will suggest an approach based on the intended purpose of each Bible translation. It will show that it is this approach, and not the traditional approaches that spark the “free vs. literal” debate, that has the potential to help church leaders and preachers to make informed, objective decisions on the translation or translations they choose to use.

### The Traditional Approaches and their Weaknesses

Historically, most Bible translation scholars have described their work in relation to two main translation schools. Fee and Stuart, in their book, *How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth* (SU, 2002), arrange nine translations of various dates along a line with “Literal” at one end and “Free” at the other (Fee and Stuart 2002: 36)<sup>1</sup>. For them, “literal” translation is “the attempt to translate by keeping as close as possible to the exact words and phrasing of the original language, yet still make sense in the receptor language” (ibid, p. 35). Translators working using the “free” approach, on the other hand, would agree with Dr. Mark L. Strauss (2004: xx) who says that “translation is first and foremost about meaning, not form.” The goal of free translation is to get as close as possible to the *ideas and meaning* of the original and to express these in a manner more closely resembling modern-day speech. The following sample of possible translations of a simple question in French illustrates the differences between these two approaches.

French: Comment vous appelez-vous?

English 1: How yourself calls you?

English 2: What do you call yourself?

English 3: What is your name?

In this example, English 1 represents the version most likely to be generated if someone with knowledge of French grammar were to look each word up in a dictionary and translate the sentence accordingly. English 2 represents the version most likely to be generated by a translator using the “literal” approach—as few changes as possible have been made to the grammar of the sentence while still making sense in English. The verb “to call” has also been retained as the literal, dictionary translation of the verb “appeler.”

English 3 represents the “free” translation approach. In this case, more attention has been paid to the normal expectations and phrasings of English than to the grammar of the original. None of the words in English 3 can be found in any form in the original but this version has the advantage of being the version that most native English speakers would be familiar with.

In this simple example we can see that literal translation has the advantage of giving us an insight

into the grammar of the original and the meanings of the individual words used. However, the disadvantage of this approach is that it is likely to generate translations that contain phrasings that are unfamiliar and do not reflect normal English use (Fee and Stuart 2002: 35; Strauss 2004: xix; Fee and Strauss 2007: 34). Free translation, on the other hand, has the advantage of offering translations that read more naturally. The disadvantage of this approach is that it makes it more difficult for readers to gain access to the patterns used in the original language (Van Leeuwen 2001: 30, Strauss 2004: xix, Fee and Strauss 2007: 57).

An example of the problems with either approach in Bible translation is found in how four different translations have handled 1 Kings 2:10. In this example, the first two translations can be roughly seen as traditional, literal translations with the second two representing the free approach to translation to differing degrees.

NKJV: So David rested with his fathers...

ESV: Then David slept with his fathers...

NLT: Then David died and was buried with his ancestors.

TM: Then David joined his ancestors.

It is clear from comparing these four translations that we have a phrase that can be loosely translated into English as "David died." The NKJV and ESV, in order to translate literally, have tried to keep as much of the original Hebrew phrasing as possible. While their choice of phrasing may be clear enough for those who are used to reading the Word, they have turned a phrase that would have been natural and easy to understand to the original readers into a phrase that is foreign and, in the case of the ESV especially, can easily be interpreted in a sense that is completely different to that intended by the original author. In the two free translations, on the other hand, the phrase either had to be extended to include both elements of the Hebrew image, as in the NLT, or recreated to express these elements and keep the same meaning as the original, in the case of *The Message*. This verse, therefore, clearly illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches.

Given the disadvantages of the pure forms of either approach, it is not surprising that the translators of many versions include the idea of varying their approach in the prefaces to their work. The translators of the English Standard Version, which classes itself as an "essentially literal" translation (ESV 2001: xxxix), found that freer translations were required at points in order to make their translation intelligible in English (ESV 2001: xl). Similarly, the translators of the New Living Translation varied their approach between literal and free translation depending upon which gave "an accurate, clear and readable English text" (NLT 2004: xliv).

Some scholars have therefore suggested that the ideal approach would be to find some sort of middle-ground between these two. Fee and Stuart (2002: 36) suggest the term "dynamic equivalence" to describe such an approach. However, this approach, while presented as "the best translational theory" (ibid) seems to be nothing more than the choice to adopt either approach as required, in much the same way as all translators do anyway (Kohlenberger 2004: ix, x)<sup>2</sup>. For example, they suggest that euphemisms be translated using modern equivalents where possible (Fee and Stuart 2002: 39), however, in the case of weights, measures and monetary amounts, they state that

...either equivalents or transliterations with marginal notes would be a good procedure with most weights and measurements. However, the use of equivalents is surely to be preferred in the passages like Isaiah 5:10 and Matthew 18:24-28. (ibid p. 38)

Such a combined approach, while convincing at first, does not actually solve the problems associated with the traditional approaches; for example, issues such as how to translate biblical measurements. In passages like Revelation 21:17, for example, where the measurement "one hundred *and* forty-four cubits" (NKJV) is likely to have symbolic significance (Ngundu 2006), Fee and Stuart would presumably prefer the Biblical measurement to be retained. However, the authors themselves show that retaining the original biblical standards can lead to the translation becoming unclear in places (Fee and Stuart 2002: 39). Therefore, their method is very likely to cause inconsistency or confusion in translation and leaves the translator without clear guidelines.

Since the differences between the methods are unclear, it would seem that discussion over which is preferable will be of more interest to theorists such as Molina and Albir (2002), whose interests lie in translation techniques rather than preachers whose interest lies in finding a way to preach the truths of the Word in a vivid way week-after-week (Monroe 2008: 12; Peterson 2003: li). Yet, even Bible

translation theorists have found that these approaches are inadequate to describe an entire translation<sup>3</sup>.

Theorists and practitioners of professional translation therefore no longer use these terms to describe entire translations. The only use of equivalent terms is to describe how translators and interpreters handle individual words or expressions (e.g. Shlesinger 1995 and Downie 2007). Given that discussions over Bible translations tend to be based on conclusions gained from the analyses of short stretches of text anyway (e.g. Fee and Stuart 2002: 36-42 and Strauss 2004) such a change is to be expected.

For those with limited knowledge of the problems of translation, the use of these terms is therefore likely to be misleading, especially since the preference for one method or another is often as much about theology as it is about linguistics. Kuykendall (2007: 263) for instance, shows how one Bible translator saw his choice of a 'literal' translation method as a reflection of his views that each word in the Bible was individually inspired. Similarly, the translators of the New King James Version were asked to sign a statement affirming their belief in a similar view of the inspiration of the Word of God (NKJV 1982: xxxiv)<sup>4</sup>.

Other writers, such as Taylor (2007: 35) have also noticed that the choice to use a particular translation can be seen as a mark of belonging to a particular strand of Christianity. Kuykendall's assertion that "it is impossible to produce a neutral English Bible translation" (2007: 279) is therefore valid. Two terms, whose only consistent use can be found in the description of small-scale translation choices, have become pregnant with theological meaning. The "literalists" find it easy to accuse "free" translators of tampering with the Word of God (e.g. Wenham 2003: 77) while translators favouring freer approaches point out the fact that literal translation can often be misleading (e.g. Fee and Stuart 2002: 42). The "literalists" have the weight of the history and tradition of the King James Version behind them. The "free" translators can point to the two Eugenés—Nida and Peterson—as their champions, the former for his insistence that translators should portray "what the text means—not what the words are" (Nida in Neff 2002: 46) and the latter for his work to translate the Bible "in the language of Today" (Peterson 2003: lii).

A truly neutral and more useful approach would therefore need to avoid the traditional classifications in order to avoid misleading readers and escape the associated theological controversies. In order to be understandable and usable by those who do not have deep knowledge of the original languages, such an approach should also be focussed on longer stretches of text than are traditionally discussed.

Individual examples would still have a place but would need to be long enough to show how the translation would perform in normal use. Modern, non-Biblical translation theory has begun to gain the same interest and it is to a theory from this domain that we will now turn. This will require the addition of a new term to the discussion.

### **Skopos Theory — Translation for a Purpose**

Unlike traditional theories of Bible translation that concentrate on how translators deal with individual words and individual sentences<sup>5</sup>, *skopos* theory deals with the translation as a whole. In *skopos* theory, the purpose of the translation, including its intended audience, as detailed in the translator's brief, is seen as the key to understanding individual translation decisions (Nord 2001: 27-29). Every translation decision is therefore seen as an attempt to create a text that will fulfil the purpose stated in this brief (Nord 2002: 39; Molina and Albir 2002: 58; Williams 1989: 20). The only translation theorist to have applied this theory to Bible translation<sup>6</sup> states:

the translator's decisions in the translation process should be (and usually are) guided by the communicative function or functions the target text is intended to achieve for its receivers in the target situation. (Nord 2003: 34)

*Skopos* theory is therefore the first translation theory to include non-linguistic factors, such as the views of those paying for the translation and the needs of those reading the translation, and to show how these are likely to affect the translation itself (Sunwoo 2007: 2). Rather than concentrating on the translator's individual linguistic decisions, *skopos* theory sees these as a motivated result of the translators' concern that their translations be acceptable to their target audience for a particular purpose (Sunwoo 2007: 12, 14, 16; Williams 1989: 22ff). Like Fee and Stuart's view, this suggests that there are times when a literal translation is helpful and times when a free translation is to be preferred. The more significant point is that, unlike traditional theories, it suggests that the reasons for these decisions can be found as much in the brief set for the translation as they can in grammatical or historical

problems in the original text (Nord 2002: 33, 34, 39).

While making a translation that is appropriate for a particular audience has been discussed by biblical translation theorists (cf. Fee and Strauss 2007: 40-41) it is often seen as a question of style rather than of translation itself (e.g. *ibid.* p. 119). In *skopos* theory on the other hand, the target audience is seen as one of the first considerations for a translator (Nord 2005: 871).

Obviously, just as the traditional theories of Bible translation need examples for illustration, *skopos* theory is meaningless without examples of how this works in practice (Sunwoo 2007: 1). It is also necessary to look closely at how relevant this change in perspective towards translation actually is for church leaders. In order to respond to both of these needs we will now take a look at the purposes given for four common Bible translations and **then suggest** why this is relevant when choosing a Bible translation for a particular use in ministry.

### **Skopos Applied — Four Translations Examined**

The first translation we will examine is the New King James version. Conceived as being a “continuation of the labours” (NKJV 1982: xxxiii) of the translators of the Authorised Version, the NKJV positions itself as being as much a modernisation of a previous work as it is a translation in its own right. The translators of the NKJV also aimed to make it possible to follow the “thought flow” (*ibid.*, xxxv) of the original King James version in their version, which suggests that in this case the translators’ “loyalty,” in the sense it is used by Nord (2002: 32)<sup>7</sup> is as much to the King James Version as it is to the original text. This view is given further credence when we consider that the theological and doctrinal terms in the King James Version have been carried over to the New King James without question (NKJV 1982: xxxv).

Armed with the knowledge of the *skopos* behind the New King James Version we can now proceed to make suggestions as to how this will affect the translators’ decision-making process and find out how much this is supported in the translation itself. The first and most obvious suggestion is that there should be a clear similarity between the New King James Version and the King James Version. A quick test of this would be to take a portion of scripture in both versions and look for similarities in translation. Here, for example, is Romans 8:28-30 in both versions:

KJV: And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

NKJV: And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

In this case we can see that, with the exception of a few changes in spelling and pronoun use, these two translations do indeed show a remarkable degree of similarity. Sentence structure, grammar and even the terms used are almost identical. Given the almost four hundred year gap between the two versions, traditional views of Bible translation are insufficient to account for this. With understanding of the Biblical languages continuing to grow, the increase in the availability of earlier manuscripts in the original languages (Wallace 2004: xxvi, xxvii; cf. also Fee and Stuart 2002: 32-34ff) as well as the changes in English grammar and word use that have taken place over the past four centuries, we would expect a new translation, even one translated using the same approaches towards the original texts as the New King James Version to differ much more from the KJV than we see here.

In order to make such conclusions truly useful for church leaders and preachers we need to suggest what effect this will have on the most likely uses for this version. In this case, the translators themselves have done much of the work for us, stating that:

The reader discovers that the sequence and selection of words, while much clearer, are so close to the traditional that there is remarkable ease in listening to the reading of either edition while following with the other. (NKJV 1982: xxxv)

One of the obvious settings in which the NKJV would prove useful is where those listening to it or reading it are familiar with or have great respect for the traditional KJV. It would therefore be helpful

to use when preaching to those who appreciate the poetic language and style of the King James Version. Conversely, the NKJV is likely to prove less useful where the KJV is not held in such high esteem or where listeners or readers prize phrasing that more closely resembles everyday speech and writing patterns (as suggested by Hill 2006: 86 quoting Walls). Similarly, where the NKJV is helpful in that it preserves the traditional terms for Biblical concepts such as predestination or justification, this very fact could impede understanding where such terms are not familiar to the congregation concerned or may carry a different meaning to their original, Biblical sense (cf. Harries 2006: 57-58 for examples) or in ministry to new believers.

If further evidence were needed that the degree of similarity between the NKJV and King James Version cannot be explained within the traditional model of Bible translation, the English Standard Version (hereafter referred to as ESV) provides it. While the ESV translators did try to position themselves in the same translation tradition as the NKJV, the goal they set themselves was to “carry forward this legacy to a new century” (ESV 2001: xxxix) unlike the NKJV where the goal was to retain the essential style of the traditional KJV as far as possible (NKJV 1982: xxxiv). We should therefore expect that the ESV, while remaining “essentially literal” (ESV 2001: xxxix) and therefore still prone to the same problems as the NKJV as regards naturalness of expression and clarity in the new language, will not mirror the KJV phrasings as closely.

The ESV translators freely admit that any translation aiming towards literalism will necessarily involve a trade-off between the wish to capture as much of the original structure as possible and the need to write in clear and readable English (ESV 2001: xl). For them “effective translation, however, requires that these links in the original be reproduced so that the flow of argument will be transparent to the reader” (ibid). We should therefore expect to see this tension in effect in the ESV translation. We should also expect to see phrasing that is closer to modern patterns of writing but with words that help shape the argument translated using terms as close in meaning and function to the original as possible. The logic here being that if these terms and the relations they make are not retained in a literal manner, there is a danger that the flow of the original argument could be lost<sup>8</sup>.

In order to see if this hypothesis is correct, we will now examine the ESV translation of the same scriptures used in our analysis of the NKJV, Romans 8:28-30.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (ESV)

As far as comparison with the KJV is concerned, the ESV certainly is further away from the KJV phrasings than the NKJV. In the first sentence, for instance, “for those who love God” is placed much earlier in the ESV as it is in the KJV/NKJV. In the third sentence, the formal “moreover” we find in the KJV/NKJV is replaced with the more normal “and.” The introduction of “in order” also clears up any remaining confusion over the precise meaning of the word “that,” allowing the reader to follow the argument more easily. In reordering the phrasing of the first sentence, however, the ESV translation introduces a phrasing that is unusual in modern English. Most readers would expect the “for those” clause to come after “all things work together for good.” This reordering also forces a repetition of “for those” in the next clause.

However, apart from these changes, the ESV does preserve much of the same technical terminology and in the same places as in the KJV/NKJV. The words “called... foreknew... predestined ... justified ... glorified” continue to be used without question and in the same way as they were in the previous translation. The effects of this choice in the ESV are much the same as those in the NKJV and therefore need no further discussion.

In order to assess the assertion the ESV translators make that “the flow of argument will be transparent to the reader” (ESV 2001: xl) we will need to examine the argument of these verses in the original Greek<sup>9</sup>. Given the context of these verses (Romans 8: 18-27), in which Paul discusses the sufferings and groanings of this current life, an argument-based translation of the first word of this verse would tend towards “but,” indicating opposition or contrast (Kasali 2006: 1364), rather than “and,” indicating that this idea is a logical continuation of the previous one. Similarly, in the original Greek, we do not see the notion that “all things work together,” where the idea would seem to be one of fate or chance bringing these things together, but instead the Greek says “He works together” (Martindale 2008: 1), suggesting instead God’s direct role in carrying out His plan.

However, apart from these issues, the translation does follow the Greek argument pattern closely

(Martindale 2008: 3-4). In fact, the reordering of the first sentence itself echoes the order of the original Greek. Similarly, the causal relationship between the first and second verse, as well as between the clauses of the second verse are retained fully. Lastly, while the word “and” at the beginning of verse three is not included in the original text, there is no problem with its inclusion here (ibid, p.2).

Given that the ESV seems to have largely achieved its *skopos* of making the argument structure of the original apparent in the English, we can conclude that the ESV would make an excellent Bible for theologians, Bible students and all those wishing to gain a clearer insight into the patterns of the original languages of the Bible. As the ESV does also display the tension we expected between readability and transparency (Martindale 2008: 2), it must be stated that those using this Bible for study purposes should not take it for granted that the ESV will follow the Greek argument exactly. Despite the beliefs of its translators (ESV 2001: xl), it should also not be taken for granted that such a “transparent” translation will necessarily be less interpretive than translations prepared to fulfil a different *skopos*, especially since all translation involves interpretation (Taylor 2007: 35; Fee and Strauss 2007: 30, 31) and since the ESV does show signs of theology affecting translation choices (Martindale 2008: 2).

The *skopos* of both the NKJV and ESV is clearly focussed on producing as many features of the original text as possible, within the bounds of English grammar, even where such features could make the text harder to understand for an English reader. The New Living Translation (called NLT from now on), on the other hand, takes a very different stance. The *skopos* of this translation can be summed up in one sentence from the Preface.

The challenge for our translators was to create a text that would communicate as clearly and powerfully to today’s readers as the original texts did to the readers and listeners in the ancient world. (NLT 2004: xliii)

This suggests that the features we should be looking for are clarity of expression, especially given the fact that the NLT translators took the extra step of employing professional stylists to check the text at every stage (NLT 2004: xlv) and given the translators’ own statement that “clarity was the primary goal” (ibid, xlv) in their work. The NLT translators also did their best to avoid the use of the kind of technical terminology we came across in the ESV and NKJV (ibid: xlviii). We should therefore expect to see such ideas either explained or replaced with more common modern alternatives. With this in mind, let us refer once again to Romans 8:28-30, this time in the NLT<sup>10</sup>.

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chose them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory. (NLT)

It is obvious upon first glance that the translators have indeed managed to avoid the use of the traditional terms found in the NKJV and ESV. Thus, “foreknew” becomes “knew ... in advance,” “justified” becomes “gave ... right standing with himself” and so on. The NLT therefore does succeed in making these concepts easier to understand for the modern reader. However, where the Greek uses a single, repeated word for these terms, such repetition may be lost due to the necessity to change phrasing according to the demands of context. Similarly, where the original author may have deliberately employed a certain word order or phrasing, this is less likely to be obvious in the NLT than it would be, for instance, in a translation such as the ESV<sup>11</sup>.

The description of the NLT as a “general purpose text” (NLT 2004: xliii) by its own translators is therefore apt. The decision to avoid the use of traditional phrasing means that the NLT is likely to be most useful when those reading or hearing the text are either not familiar with the traditional terminology or find it confusing or simply when those hearing or reading the text prize clarity above “majesty of style” and wish a translation that reads naturally. This same feature means that the NLT could be very useful in discipling new believers and for devotional use in those cases where ease of understanding is vitally important. On the other hand, this very clarity of expression and dedication to present the Word in language that more closely resembles modern use means that the NLT is less likely to be useful for studies into the occurrence and use of specific words and phrases in the original languages.

The last translation to be examined is the most controversial, with some ministers calling it “a paraphrase rather than a translation” (Collins 2008). *The Message*, translated by Eugene Peterson positions itself as a “reading Bible” (Peterson 2003: lii), with the emphasis on trying to elicit the same

response from modern readers as the original texts would have elicited from theirs (ibid). The translator also makes it clear that *The Message* is not meant to replace the range of “study Bibles” (ibid) that were available when the translation was published. This is presumably a reference to translations such as the ESV that try to make sure that phrasing and word choice is “transparent to the original” (ESV 2001: xl), thereby making study of such areas much easier.

The overall *skopos* of this translation is to present the Bible in the way its writers would have written it if it were being written today (Strauss 2004: xvi), making it likely to excel in portraying the emotion, character and effect of the original in a way that is even more familiar to readers than even the expressions used in a translation like the NLT. Here is Romans 8:28-30 in *The Message*.

That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good. God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun. (TM)

One of the first things that those who are used to reading the Bible will notice in this passage is the complete absence of any traditional terminology whatsoever. Even words like “firstborn” are absent and instead we have phrases such as “the son stands first in the line of humanity he restored.” While this change is likely to make this translation even easier to read for those who are not familiar with these terms, it increases the disadvantages that we associated with this in our discussion of the NLT. In this case, since the sentences are rephrased entirely, it would prove nearly impossible to use *The Message* for studies of individual words or phrases in the original languages.

The translation of the last two sentences represents a further stage in the progression from the phrasing of the NKJV. Where translations such as the NLT keep largely the same structure as the NKJV/KJV and fill it with new phrasing, keeping the same level of repetition, *The Message* goes one step further, making the repetition less obvious, consistent with its aim of prioritising readability in English over the exact representation of specific patterns in the original languages as is to be expected given its *skopos*.

Taken together, this suggests that the translator was correct in calling his translation a “reading Bible.” *The Message* reads very easily and, by opting to try to phrase the ideas in a modern style also has the strength of illuminating passages that might have previously seemed dry or overly technical. It therefore seems ideal for those who have either never read the Bible or have lost interest in it. It also should prove useful in offering new insight into familiar passages. It will not, however, prove useful for those attempting to do word studies or for those who seek a translation that uses an exalted style due to the fact that it was never meant for such purposes.

### **Lessons from a *Skopos*-based Analysis**

More than anything else, this short analysis of four translations has shown that when the *skopos* of a particular Bible translation is identified, it will give a good guide as to the likely relative strengths and weaknesses of the translation in question and where it is likely to be most useful. Those translations whose *skopos* is to represent the original structure as far as is grammatically possible are likely to prove less readable for the non-specialist. Conversely, those translations whose *skopos* is to present the Word of God as if it were being written today will prove less suitable for word studies or for providing a window into the structure of the original languages.

So far, the lessons we have learned have been similar to those that could be learned by assuming that the traditional classifications would be consistent in any given translation. Where *skopos* theory is more useful than the traditional classifications is in its insistence that the aim of the translation be identified; thereby allowing some form of comparison to be made between this aim and the aims and requirements of the translation user and use. For instance, for detailed study of individual words and expressions in the original languages, it will be worth identifying a translation that aims to show such features. For work with new believers or those unfamiliar with the Bible, however, a translation whose *skopos* is to avoid the use of theological terminology and to present the Word in more natural phrasing would be preferable. The choice of which translation to use in preaching will be dependant upon the aim of the sermon and on the background of the congregation: preaching to a group of businessmen may call for a

different translation than preaching to academics or those from less educated backgrounds, for example.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to show the usefulness of *skopos* theory in helping church leaders choose the Bible translation they will use in any given situation. We have seen that the choices translators make in their work is as much affected by the *skopos* of their translation as it is by factors in the original language. The traditional approaches to Bible translation cannot explain, for example, the marked similarity between the NKJV and the KJV; *skopos* theory can. *Skopos* theory is also more useful in that it suggests that, if leaders wish to know which translation is best for which specific purpose, the prefaces found in each Bible translation will prove a reliable guide. Translations aimed at those familiar with a particular previous translation will prove more useful for work among such people. Translations aimed at those confused by, or unfamiliar with traditional terminology will prove more useful among people sharing those traits in common.

The correct response to the question posed in the title of this article is to avoid the temptation to make a universal recommendation of any single Bible translation or even of any single translation philosophy. Instead, this question should be continually in the minds of leaders as they minister and the answer should be formulated according to the purpose for which the translation is to be used. Just as Paul the Apostle could preach the gospel in the language of philosophy to the Greeks and in the language of the Old Testament to the Jews, we must be prepared to adjust the translation used according to the requirements of the particular ministry or personal situation.

## Want More?

To read Jonathan Downie's more in depth article, "The End of an Era?: Does *Skopos* Theory Spell the End of the 'Free vs. Literal' Paradigm?" go online to:

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Fee and Strauss (2007: 28) these terms are replaced by "formal equivalent" and "functional equivalent" respectively on a similar diagram. For reasons of clarity and simplicity, the more well-recognised terms have been retained in this article.
- <sup>2</sup> The choice of the term "mediating" in Fee and Strauss (2007: 28) further underlines this point.
- <sup>3</sup> The diagram in Fee and Strauss (2007: 28) illustrates this point. Rather than the orderly arrangement of translations into three categories as in Fee and Stuart (2002: 36) we now have translations placed in the gaps between categories too. The question then arises as to how useful these theories actually are if even translation theorists have difficulty in using them as distinct categories.
- <sup>4</sup> This neat theological formation, based presumably upon Matthew 4:4, seems very persuasive upon first reading. However, given that *all* translation requires reordering of words, its full and logical application would devalue and threaten the legitimacy of any translation of the Bible under any form. As can be seen by the example from 1 Kings 2:10, it is also the case that a literal rendering can actually distort the original meaning on occasion. Therefore, even if this view is accepted, its application to Bible translation is by no means as clear as the NKJV scholars would have us believe.
- <sup>5</sup> Most professional translators would agree with Zhu (1999) that the second of these is where most translation problems are solved. This perspective is underlined by the fact that most of the software aimed at helping translators by finding and pre-translating repetitive phrases and inserting these into the translation cuts the full text into individual sentences by default.
- <sup>6</sup> According to Prof Christiane Nord (2003: 34), she and her husband translated the New Testament into German using this approach, producing the DNT translation in 1999.
- <sup>7</sup> "Within the framework of the functionalist approaches, I have suggested the concept of Loyalty. It was first introduced into *Skopostheorie* in 1989 ... in order to account for the culture-specificity of translation concepts, setting an ethical limitation to the otherwise unlimited range of possible *skopoi* for the translation of one particular source text. It was argued that the translator, in their role as mediator between two cultures, has a

special responsibility with regard to their partners, i.e. the source-text author, the client or commissioner of the translation, and the target-text receivers, precisely in those cases where there are discrepant views as to what a "good" translation is or should be. As an *interpersonal* relationship, loyalty was supposed to replace the traditional *intertextual* relationship of "faithfulness" or "fidelity", concepts that usually refer to a linguistic or stylistic similarity between the source and the target *texts*, regardless of the communicative intentions and/or expectations involved." (Nord 2002: 32)

<sup>8</sup> I have previously (Downie 2007) discussed the effect of interpreting these and other cohesive devices between French and English and how this could affect the flow of an argument in spoken language.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Trevor Martindale of International Christian College in Glasgow for the Greek analysis of this passage and the comparisons between the Greek and the ESV.

<sup>10</sup> The version of the NLT quoted here is the most recent, 2004 edition of the NLT, as it appeared in *The Essential Evangelical Parallel Bible*.

<sup>11</sup> Fee and Strauss (2007: 56-7) make a similar point regarding translations of 1 Corinthians 3:10, Luke 13:19-20 and Mark 1. The key point here is that, if we follow the argument of *skopos* theory, we cannot classify decisions taken in these cases as errors or missed meanings but as a result of the translators' decisions to prioritise one quality [or standard of excellence following (Fee and Strauss 2007: 36-41)] over another due to the purpose of the translation.

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**Jonathan Downie** (as of 2009) is a professional interpreter and translator, with a research interest in the use of interpreting and translation in Christian ministry. His company, Integrity Languages, aims to provide interpreting and translation services for Christian organizations as well as advice and training on best practice in these areas. He is married to Helen, a graduate of International Christian College in Glasgow, Scotland.

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