2. TRANSLATE THE ORIGINAL TEXT

Many significant problems with Bible translations today can be traced to the influence of previous translations. We have seen that this influence is not slight. The genre codes and prominence codes of previous translations completely dominate the translations, and there is a strong influence of the reference codes and the relation codes.

The intimidating force of earlier translations can only be overcome by translators committed to translating the writings of scripture as they were first written. They must have the fortitude to resist bowing to the demands of previous translations. The translator's perspective should be to please those individuals who are by far the most important when it comes to the writings of scripture: the authors themselves.

No writer, translation, or prominent voice from any age should be allowed to come between a scripture translator and the language codes chosen by the authors of these documents. A translator honors an author by making sure that every language code he included in his writing is accurately represented in the translation of that writing. The authors are the ones who made all the decisions in the writing of their documents. They constructed every text the way they wanted it to be. No translator today or in any other century has the right to overlook, change, or supplement any of these codes.

The authors are allowed to be the only voice in their own writing if a translator constantly compares the language codes of the translation with the language codes of the author's original text. That original text is the only sure and comprehensive statement of exactly what the author wanted to say.

This brings up two crucial questions: Exactly what is the original text? And what steps should be taken by a translator to ensure that nothing more and nothing less than the original text be translated? The answers to these questions have to begin with very basic observations about the original texts of the scriptures.

The original texts of the scriptures must include the situation codes

The author's original text is the text actually written by the author, written at the time the author wrote it, written where the author wrote it, written in the language in which the author wrote it, and written for people the author actually knew or knew about. It may seem childishly simple to make these observations, but it's precisely these foundational things that Bible translators consistently forget when they allow previous translations of a writing to influence them.

A responsible translator will do everything possible to understand a text from the perspective of the situation codes and then to translate the text in such a way that the reader gains this same perspective from the translation. It is a weakness of many readers of the scriptures—and indeed even many translators of the scriptures—that they are not well-versed in the languages, the cultures, the history, and the work-a-day realities of the world of these writings.

Translators have to be on the top of their game to accurately deal with situation codes. It requires more than being familiar with Koine Greek and well-read in the history and culture of the time. It means a translator must make an extensive excursion into a world very different from ours in many ways and surprisingly similar in others. Seeing both, the differences and the similarities, is the challenge.

The trip crosses two thousand years of history to the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Though it was a huge area encompassing many cultures and languages, it was also a broad cultural unit in which the people had certain linguistic and cultural elements in common. Many who lived at that time shared the Koine Greek language in which the documents of scripture were written. It was also a time of relative peace in the region—the so-called Pax Romana—which assured a certain freedom of movement across borders. An extensive network of Roman roads and heavy maritime traffic further enhanced the communication ties in the area.

In addition, many of the peoples in this Roman and Greek sphere of influence had very similar understandings of travel, farming, animals, occupations, recent historical developments, religious practices, social expectations, political frameworks, and many matters of daily life that all contributed to extensive networks of shared language codes among people. The writers of the scriptures shared many of these same networks of language code with their readers.

Like most areas, the Greco-Roman world was also typified by a great deal of cultural and linguistic diversity with bilingualism and trilingualism being more the rule than the exception. This is even true of most parts of the world today. Although America has always been somewhat of an exception to this, developments in the last twenty years show that even America is quickly moving in the direction of greater cultural and linguistic diversity. Spanish can be heard in many parts of the USA now. Spanish radio stations, Spanish TV programming, and Spanish newspapers are becoming common.

Other languages are also spoken in the USA and though their influence will continue to expand, English will still continue to be used and understood by the great majority of people. Greek was this kind of common language in the first century.

The scriptures reflect both the diversity of the first-century Mediterranean world as well the common culture. The people of Galatia, for example, were not the same as those who lived in Rome, and the inhabitants of that huge city were not identical with the people James addressed in his writing. The scriptures also include situation codes that were applicable only to the readers in view. When Paul wrote to Philemon and others in his household, for instance, there were personal matters between the two men that are part of the situation codes of that letter.

This is the way situation codes often work. They often relate to any of three different sources of information in a writing. The first is from general cultural and linguistic sources, the second is from the more specific regional sources, and the third source is the specific setting and occasion of the writing.

The three sources of situation codes

The following overview shows the three main sources of situation codes and provides descriptions and examples of each:

> 1. There are the situation codes that are shared among various ethnic groups. These could also be called the *common* cultural, historical, and linguistic codes. Examples of these in the first century are the Koine Greek language, the political and military influences of the Roman Empire, and the modes of international travel and commerce.
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> 2. There are the situation codes that are limited to a specific ethnic group. These could also be called the *regional* cultural, historical, and linguistic codes. Examples of these in the first century are the Parthian language, the Jewish religion, and the cultural distinctives of the Cretans.
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> 3. There are the situation codes that are unique to the occasion of a writing. These could also be called the *specific* cultural, historical, and linguistic codes. Examples in the scriptures include the complex relational situation of Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon, and problems that were causing divisions among the believers in Corinth.

Every text has situation codes that stem from at least one and very possibly all three of these sources. A translator must recognize these codes to ensure that the text remains true to the "original" text. This is no small task.

Based on the results of our evaluation of Bible translations, situation codes are obviously a blind spot for many Bible translators. This is not to say that all Bible translators do not know Koine Greek well—though many do not—nor that they have not researched first-century issues in the course of doing their revisions. The problem is that they have often not subjected *all* of the text to the stipulations of the situation codes.

This can only be done if a translator completely slips into the shoes of the authors and does everything possible to see the text through the eyes of the first readers. Were translators to do this, they would never produce translations in the form of a Bible. It would be unthinkable. Were their heads completely in the first-century as they analyze the text, they would not only immediately *realize* how foreign a Bible would be to a person living in the first century, but they would also *feel* how foreign it would be.

The original texts of the scriptures have well-marked borders

The author's original text is the text that begins with the very first letter he wrote and ends with the very last letter. And it includes all the letters between the first and the last in exactly the order in which the author placed them. This is the complete text. It may seem overly simple and obvious to mention these things, but they are facts about the original text that Bible translators consistently forget when they allow previous translations to influence them.

There is an absolute limit to the original text. It had borders, and those borders were unmistakable, formed by the ink that was actually visible on the writing surface. This is what the first readers actually saw with their eyes. When the author wrote each individual letter, each one was put there by his choice and his plan. Nothing can be added to the codes, subtracted from the codes, or rearranged among the codes without changing what the author actually wrote. This sum total of all the letters in their correct order is the explicit text of a writing.

Nothing should fill a translator with more awe and respect than the author's explicit text. Looking at this text is the same as looking over the shoulder of the author as he writes. Reading this text is like watching the text grow word for word in the moment that it is being written. It's like being there with the author himself. This is the miracle of language and literacy. This is why every word and the placement of every word in the original language should be considered the absolutely inviolate text for a translator. This is the translator's direct contact with the author. No translation of it can ever replace it.

This is another weakness of the translators who insist on maintaining traditional forms of the Bible. Instead of being very sensitive and strict to let nothing into a translation that does not have clear roots in the author's explicit text, they allow all sorts of extra information to flood the texts—titles, subtitles, chapters, verses, notes, and even commentary. And instead of being very touchy about not allowing anything to be deleted from the explicit text, they ignore and change language codes. This signals a lack of respect for the original text, and it shouldn't be said with any less directness. This is one more of the negative consequences of revising instead of translating.

The original texts of the scriptures include all the language codes

The author's original text includes all the language codes and coding procedures that the author wrote into the text. Once again, this is an obvious observation, but one that Bible translators consistently violate. The original text is not just letters in rows, but it is language code. It is a complex network of linguistic rules, regulations, relationships, and references that requires insight and precision to unravel into the author's intended meaning.

Too often translators overlook language codes in the original text and allow these codes to be replaced by codes from later translations. This is another problem stemming from trusting translations. It's simply too easy to assume that previous translators have done their homework. That is not always the case.

The work of translating is a complex and demanding undertaking. Recognizing all the language codes and recognizing the coding procedures that accompany them requires great skill and determination. Translators in the Bible tradition have been far too lax in their analysis of the codes and the coding procedures in the original texts and been far too willing to simply accept the decisions of translators, some of which can be traced back to medieval times. The result of these oversights has been translations with inaccurate and fractured networks of code.

This evaluation of the work of Bible translators today is not too harsh. We know that Bible translators have not been taking the necessary steps and doing the necessary research and analysis, not only because of the deficiencies of their work, but also because a vital accompaniment to the texts is lacking: The missing piece is *documentation*. Bible translators are notorious for not documenting their work.

Lack of documentation is always a sign of superficial work in any area. In our world, wherever conscientious work is being done, documentation is the logical accompaniment. Hospitals require documentation for everything that is done with or for a patient. Airlines require that flight plans be filed in a timely manner and that the maintenance procedures on all equipment be documented. Software programmers document all of their procedures. Banks and financial institutions document every transaction.

Documentation is so important because it makes a detailed evaluation of all decisions and procedures possible. It makes it possible to trace and examine the specific steps workers have taken to complete a task. Mistakes can be found and eliminated. Documentation turns a process that otherwise cannot be viewed into an open and transparent ledger of plans, decisions, assignments, and actions.

Bible translation committees are traditionally closed societies. The names of the translators are obtainable, but specific information about translation decisions is not made publically available. All the reader ever sees of a translation is the end product along with an introduction, a short statement of translating principles, and advertising-style blurbs that praise the accuracy and trustworthiness of the translation in question.

As we have demonstrated in previous chapters, however, it is not difficult to prove that Bible translations do not live up to their own hype. All one has to do is compare the language codes used in a translation with those in the original texts to determine the considerable differences between the two. When those differences are traced back to previous translations, then it shows that the translation is a revision and not a translation. This is why documentation is irrelevant for most Bible translators. It's only important that a translation live up to the dictates of a previous translation.

The purpose of documentation, however, should be to substantiate that the translators have truly translated from the original text and that the translation is able to meet the demands of that original text. The documentation should record the linguistic reasons for all the essential decisions made by the translators. It should extend from an analysis of the source text to an analysis of the target-language text.

A Bible translation has appeared in the last decade which has claimed to remedy the problem of documentation. It is the *Net Bible,* an internet based translation which, in the words of the translators, *allows a running commentary on the translators' decisions to a degree never seen before in any translation of the Bible* (p. 12). It includes over 60,000 notes which are of four kinds: translators notes, study notes, text-critical notes, and map notes.

In the preface it states: *This level of documentation is a first for a Bible translation, making transparent the textual basis and the rationale for key renderings (including major interpretive options and alternative translations).*

When I first read the statements of the translators of the *Net Bible,* I was impressed by many of their goals and procedures and particularly by the promise of documentation. As I read through the *Net Bible* translation, however, I noticed that it differs little from other translations. And I noticed that what it calls documentation—the inclusion of its many notes—is at the best a limited documentation of a small selection of the language codes. Plus, it was obvious that the *Net Bible* took over practically all of the language codes from previous translations that follow the one-book "Bible" tradition of scripture translations.

In general, the translators notes in the *Net Bible* are of diverse quality. Those that attempt to explain difficult portions of text, and those that explain aspects of setting, history, location, or background are the most helpful.

The *Net Bible* notes that relate to the language codes are mainly limited to issues within a sentence or a clause (relation codes and reference codes). This has always been the traditional focus of text analysis. My scanning of the notes turned up few translators notes that referred to genre codes, situation codes, or prominence codes. These important codes are simply taken over from previous translations without comment. Because of such deficiencies, the translators notes can by no means fulfill the function of documentation.

Effective documentation cannot exclude crucial language codes. This would be equivalent to a bank only recording 40% of a person's transactions on printouts. This kind of documentation is basically useless and calls into question the integrity of the responsible institution.

In I Theophilus (Luke) 1:1-4, for example, there are eleven translators notes (tn) and not a single one refers to genre or prominence issues. This is remarkable because there is probably no portion of text in any scripture translation, the *Net Bible* included, that is more chaotic than this text. The notes are not only irrelevant to the real issues in the text but the information offered in some of the notes is more than questionable. Documentation simply must be comprehensive to be effective. Documentation of a translation must refer to all the crucial language codes in a text and not just a random, unconnected selection.

In summary, the information contained in the 60,000 notes in the Net Bible by no means fulfills the need for documenting a scripture translation. Apart from a selection of syntactically oriented notes, various notes referring to certain problem passages, and those study notes that illuminate first-century perspectives, they exclude the great bulk of issues that normal documentation would require. These include the genre codes, situation codes,

prominence codes, rhetoric codes, and all those matters related to target language choice such as the results of language surveys and language tests, as well as detailed discussions of all other relevant target language issues and options.

In other words, documenting a translation requires a great deal more detail, the inclusion of a much wider range of tasks, and a significantly more comprehensive approach than the notes in the *Net Bible* provide. Apart from the useful notes we already mentioned, the notes in the *Net Bible* offer little more than the commentary of a so-called study Bible.

The *Net Bible* is clearly a revision and not a translation from the original texts. To truly translate from the originals, the translators have to get "unstuck" from the Bible tradition of translating that takes its main impetus from the Vulgate translation of the fifth century, and they have to muster up the courage to transport their perspectives all the way back to the first century when the scriptures were written. That's the only place and time in which the original meaning of the scriptures can be discovered. It's the scriptures as they were written then that need to be translated and documented. In the following chapters we will outline how a translation should be documented. Chapter 9, in particular, deals in greater detail with the task of documenting a translation of the scriptures.

The sources of the original texts

None of the original texts produced personally by one of the authors exists as far as we know. What we know of the original texts is known through copies of them. For the most part, the copies agree with one another. There are places in the texts, however—words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and small portions of text—that are different among the various manuscripts.

Opinions about these differences have been the subject of a large body of literature for many years. Among the experts, this field of research and study is known as textual criticism, and it includes the collecting of manuscript copies of the various scripture writings, the recording of the variant readings among them, and the developing of methods to determine the readings that are most likely the originals. Anyone who values the writings of scripture should be well-informed about places in the texts where there are variant readings and be aware of the reasons for the readings that have been included in the texts.

In this evaluation, we have chosen not to deal in great detail with text-critical questions simply because it has been dealt with elsewhere and because it requires that a significant amount of information be mastered. It is important, however, to make the following two observations which are often not considered in discussions about the reliability of the manuscripts of the scriptures we possess.

Determining the exact text of the scriptures

Though the determination of the exact text of each of the scriptures is a matter that by no means should be minimized, it is not among the most serious problems besetting Bible

translations. This is a significant observation because anyone following the topic of Bible translations in the print media could easily conclude that one of the only issues left to solve today is to determine the exact text of the scriptures. The matter has particularly gained notoriety through claims by advocates of the King James Bible that most other Bible translations are based on a faulty text of the scriptures.

There is no doubt that determining an exact text of the Greek scriptures is a matter that should not be ignored. But the problems of variants in the manuscripts pale in comparison to the problems that we have already uncovered in the Bible translations. It is one thing to argue the reasons for preferring a word or a phrase over another, but it is quite another matter to add language codes that are obviously not in the text, to subtract codes that are there, to ignore genre codes, to highlight the wrong prominence codes, to overlook rhetoric codes, to use language structures foreign to the way readers speak, and to use target-language expressions that not only do not correspond to original meanings but lead a reader to understand words in ways never intended by any author of the scriptures. These translation problems affect the texts of the scriptures in far more harmful ways than most of the known textual variants possibly could.

The second observation stems from an unnecessary problem caused by the experts who actually do the work of determining the texts of the scriptures and then publish the results for readers and translators.

The Greek documents used by most Bible translators

The two most-used editions of the Greek New Testament have both added many language codes from traditional sources to their texts. The text on which the *King James Version* is based is known as the *Textus Receptus* which is also often referred to as the majority text. The Greek text underlying most of the other Bible translations is the *Greek New Testament,* published by the United Bible Societies. Each of these texts is based on a different philosophy of determining what readings should be preferred among those that differ in the manuscripts.

What goes unmentioned, however, is the degree to which standard editions of both of these Greek texts have included much information from traditional sources. Both texts call themselves *The Greek New Testament.* That title is neither original, nor found anywhere in the original writings. Both use titles for the individual scriptures that are not original. Both put the writings in exactly the same order as did the Latin Vulgate translation. That is not original. Both place "John" between First and Second Theophilus (Luke and Acts). That is not original. Both use the chapter and verse structuring as part of the text—and use them prominently. That is not original. None of these things was ever a decision of an author of scripture.

The UBS *Greek New Testament* also makes a heavy use of subtitles, and amazingly they are just as ill placed and unrelated to the text as are those in the Bible translations we evaluated. The subtitle preceding the key imperative at Col. 2:6, for example, is *Fullness of Life in Christ*. This subtitle is not only contextually inaccurate, but misleading as well. The UBS *Greek New Testament* also adds punctuation marks to the text. They are not original.

This state of affairs with the Greek editions is surprising. One would think that the publishers of documents claiming to be the sources of the scriptures would be particularly careful not to let information from other sources permeate the texts. Unfortunately, this is not the case. These additions to the texts of the scriptures continue to influence the translators and readers who use them.

In summary, it should not be too much to demand of scripture translators that they translate the original text and only the original text of each of the writings of scripture. This would certainly be the wish of the authors themselves. It should never be forgotten that the only complete and reliable text of any of the scriptures is the original text in its own situational context and including all of its language codes and adding no other language codes.