

**TRANSLATION VERSUS TRANSLITERATION:
THE TRIUMPH OF CLARITY OVER OPACITY**

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My love affair with the Bible began sixty-three years ago, soon after I became a Christian. Esther Everard gave the invitation at the conclusion of a junior-church service at Lorimer Memorial Baptist Church on Chicago's south side, and I responded to the call of Jesus on my life. Deacon Leo Hull ushered me into the inquiry room and explained the plan of salvation to me. Pastor I. Cedric Peterson baptized me on Easter Sunday morning, 1940.

The earliest chorus I can remember learning was "Jesus loves me, this I know, / for the Bible tells me so." That wonderful bit of poetry taught me that I could have confidence in Jesus' love for me simply on the basis of Scripture's witness. Soon I was singing "The B-I-B-L-E, / yes, that's the book for me; / I stand alone on the Word of God, / the B-I-B-L-E." The Bible became *the* book for me, my book, the Word of God on which I could take my stand. Excursions down to the Chicago Loop on Saturday mornings often included a memorable half hour in the studios of station WMBI, "the radio voice of Moody Bible Institute." There I joined the KYB Club, "KYB" standing for "Know Your Bible." I eagerly looked forward to "Aunt" Theresa Worman's Bible stories each week. Bible drills and Bible quizzes became staples of my boyhood faith, which grew by leaps and bounds. During each of my four years in high school, I read the Bible through from cover to cover.

Needless to say, music continued to be an important part of my social and spiritual life. I

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sang baritone, then bass, in my high school male chorus and in our church choir. As social mores and cultural practices began to change ever so imperceptibly, so did the music we sang. When the so-called “New Look” dress code became the rage in the early 1950s, two of my peers and I formed a musical group that we called the New Look Trio. We sang mostly at our home church, the Liberty Bible Church in Chesterton, Indiana, but now and again we would be asked to do a gig at a nearby church. We always began our concerts with our theme song:

Get the new look / from the old Book,
Get the new look from the Bible!
Get the new look / from the old Book,
Get the new look from God’s Word!

The inward look, / the outward look,
The upward look from the old, old Book —
Get the new look / from the old Book,
Get the new look from God’s Word!

The drumbeat of that bit of doggerel pounding in my head served to remind me again and again that reading the Bible was indispensable for helping me understand who I was (“the inward look”), why I was honor-bound to relate myself in positive ways to everyone around me (“the outward look”), and—most important of all—how I was to love and worship and serve my Lord

(“the upward look”).

And now for something completely different: In those formative days I became a loyal fan of *Revelation* magazine (later renamed *Eternity*). It was founded by Donald Grey Barnhouse, distinguished pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, and edited and nurtured by him during its early years. I especially enjoyed his series of meditations on the book of Genesis, in which he would write a paragraph of exposition on a verse or part of a verse, proceeding through Genesis chapter by chapter, month after month, year after year. His basic text was the *King James Version*, although he would sometimes provide his own translation of a word or phrase or sentence in order to bring out additional nuances of the Hebrew not found in the *KJV*. At first I was somewhat shocked by what seemed to me to be his unauthorized (and therefore presumptuous) attacks on the *Authorized Version*, but I eventually came to understand that no translation of the Bible—not even the *NIV*—is sacrosanct.

The *KJV* itself represented the brilliant culmination of a movement that was, by all accounts, a golden age of translating the Bible into English. Beginning with the work of John Wycliffe in 1384 and continuing through that of such luminaries as William Tyndale, Miles Coverdale, John Rogers, William Whittingham, Matthew Parker and Gregory Martin, the movement included such versions as *Matthew's Bible*, the *Great Bible*, the *Geneva Bible*, the *Bishops' Bible* and the *Rheims-Douai Bible*. But within a generation or two of its first edition in 1611, the *KJV* had achieved such popularity and acceptance with the reading public that it remained virtually unchallenged as the Bible of choice for the next three and a half centuries. Due to a number of circumstances, that kind of dominance is not likely to occur again.

Nevertheless, it would seem that we are now in the midst of another similar movement, one that can justly be called a second golden age of English Bible translation. It has been launched primarily (although not exclusively) by evangelicals determined to render the Word of God in forms and formats that present the divine message in language

that is uncompromisingly accurate, winsomely beautiful, crystal clear and appropriately dignified. The resulting versions range all the way from formal-equivalence translations, so-called “word-for-word” renderings that tend to be word-based and emphasize correspondence to the form of the original languages, to functional-equivalence translations, so-called “thought-for-thought” renderings that tend to be meaning-based and stress clarity of English expression. Formal-equivalence translations include the *NASB*, *NKJV* and *ESV*, while functional-equivalence examples include paraphrases such as *The Living Bible* and *The Message* as well as nonparaphrastic translations like the *TEV*, *CEV*, *NCV* and *NLT*. Occupying a midpoint between, or symbiosis of, the formal and the functional are the *NIV* and the *HCSB*, while the *REB* leans toward the functional even as the *NRSV* is closer to the formal end of the spectrum.¹ Needless to say, depending on one’s evaluative criteria several of these translations might be categorized somewhat differently. The described continuum, however, is typical.

As Clinton Arnold points out in a recent article, “[n]either of these philosophies should be characterized as the *right way* of translating. They both have merits and disadvantages.”² He

notes that “[A]ll translations”—of whatever sort—“must make a number of changes and interpretive decisions to render Scripture in[to] intelligible English.” He opines that “on more

than one occasion [he has] been asked by earnest Christians, ‘Why can’t we simply develop a very literal translation that doesn’t interpret the text?’ ” After giving his literal, word-by-word translation of John 1:18 as follows: “God no one has seen ever; only-begotten God the being into the bosom of the father that one explained,” Arnold outlines

¹C. E. Arnold, “It’s All Greek to Me,” *Discipleship Journal* 132 (2002), p. 35.

²*Ibid.* (italics his).

how several of the above-mentioned translations handle various aspects of the word-order, grammatico-syntactical, elliptical and interpretive issues inherent in the Greek text of that particular verse. Then—in flat and welcome contradiction to the incredibly naïve statements made in more than one recent volume on translation theory—Arnold concludes as follows: “You can see that a lot of interpretation is needed just to get the Greek sentence into a form of English that makes sense. A translation that does not interpret is impossible.”³ Indeed. Many others have forcefully underscored the same point, one example being Ray Dillard: “I cannot think of a single decision that translators make that is not in some way interpretive.”⁴ As Mark Strauss observes, “Every translation constantly involves interpretive decisions, all of which change the words (from Hebrew or Greek to English) and all of which inevitably change subtle nuances of meaning.”⁵ D. A. Carson puts it

even more strongly: “Surely we are not to return to the astonishing naïveté that thought that translation could be done without interpretation? . . . [T]he notion that one can translate responsibly *without* interpretation is, quite frankly, shockingly ignorant of the most basic challenges facing translators.”⁶ Moisés Silva defines a translator as “someone

³*Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴Quoted in R. K. Barnard, *God’s Word in Our Language* (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 1989), p. 53; cf. also, e.g., D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive-Language Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 72.

⁵M. L. Strauss, “Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate: A Response to Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World* (edd. G. G. Scorgie, M. L. Strauss and S. M. Voth; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 123 (italics his); cf. also Strauss, “Form, Function, and the ‘Literal Meaning’ Fallacy in Bible Translation” (unpublished paper, 2003), p. 7.

⁶D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation,” in *Challenge*, pp. 73-74 (italics his). Cf. also, e.g., G. Van Belle, “Dialogue with Tradition Challenges Confronting Exegesis and Biblical Theology in the 21st Century,” *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003), p. 9; K. L. Barker, “Bible Translation Philosophies with Special Reference to the New International Version,” in *Challenge*, p. 52; H. Bullock, *An Introduction to the Poetic Books of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), p. 168.

who, like it or not, *transforms* a text by *transferring* it from one linguistic-cultural context to another.” He says of the *KJV* translators that they “responsibly interpreted the text, then transposed it to a different historical setting and thereby transmuted it into a form it did not have before. But that hardly means they betrayed the text. On the contrary, such a transformation made it possible for millions to hear and understand its message.”⁷

Umberto Eco, the distinguished Italian semiotician, goes so far as to conclude that “translation is a species of the *genus* interpretation,”⁸ having earlier stated that “[s]imilarity in meaning can only be established by interpretation, and translation is a special case of interpretation” and that “[t]ranslations do not concern a

comparison between two languages but the interpretation of two texts in two different languages.”⁹ To put it somewhat differently, translation is much more than merely transliteration, the transcription of a text in one alphabet into that of another. Rather, it involves transmutation of form, transference of meaning, transposition from one setting to another. “We decide to translate, not on the basis of the dictionary [alone], but on the basis of the whole history of two literatures.”¹⁰

If, then, we are to be faithful translators of holy Scripture, what overall principles and policies ought we to follow? Those adopted by the Committee on Bible Translation that produced the *NIV* and completed its work on the *TNIV* in July of this year have been careful to adhere to time-honored translation standards cherished by God’s people through the centuries. Here is a partial list:

⁷M. Silva, “Are Translators Traitors? Some Personal Reflections,” in *Challenge*, p. 47 (italics his).

⁸U. Eco, *Experiences in Translation* (tr. A. McEwen; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 80.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 13.

At every point the translation shall be faithful to the Word of God as represented by the most accurate text of the original languages of Scripture.

The translation shall reflect clearly the unity and harmony of the Spirit-inspired writings.

The aim shall be to make the translation represent as clearly as possible only what the original says, and not to inject additional elements by unwarranted paraphrasing.

The translation shall be designed to communicate the truth of God's revelation as effectively as possible to English readers in the language of the people.

Every effort shall be made to achieve good English style.

The finished product shall be suitable for use in public worship, in the study of the Word, and in devotional reading.

Under the heading of "Degree of Literalness," the following ground plan is laid out:

The purpose of the project is not to prepare a word-for-word translation nor yet a paraphrase. The exact stance between these extremes cannot be stated in specific terms. The concern is to express in good English the thought of the original.

Regardless of how literal or free the translation at any point, effort is to be made to carry over [i.e., translate] the ideas and shades of meaning from the original and to avoid adding ideas not found in the words and syntax of the original or not implied in the context.

Clear understanding of the original is the first step in the translation process. In line with this the special ideas and styles of the particular book or author should be kept in mind.

As to the “[t]ype of English desired”:

In general, modern English is to be used. Lengthy sentences of the original should be broken up into shorter units. If the Greek or Hebrew syntax has a good parallel in modern English, it should be used. But if there is no good parallel, the English syntax appropriate to the meaning of the original is to be chosen.

Ask yourself, “How do we say that in common speech? Do we say it that way today?” Also read the passage[s] as a whole and aloud to check for euphony and suitability for public reading.

Under the rubric of “Specific characteristics of the English desired,” the following random samples indicate the intended flavor of the final product:

Transposition of phrases and clauses . . . is permissible to get a clearer rendering. . . . [A]ctives and passives may be interchanged. . . . A direct quotation in the original may be rendered by an indirect quotation in English, especially in cases of a quotation within a quotation. . . . Pronouns should be substituted for nouns if the antecedent is clear and the English is better served. Nouns can be similarly substituted for pronouns. . . . Kai, de, and the Hebrew conjunction Waw may be treated with some freedom.”

All of these principles and policies of the Committee on Bible Translation are citations

from the CBT *Translators' Manual* that was written thirty-five years ago¹¹ as work on the *New International Version* was getting underway. Amazingly prescient for their time, they have changed not one whit since then and were still scrupulously followed by our Committee as we brought our work on *Today's New International Version* to a close. We reached our goals of revisiting many Old Testament and New Testament texts and of bringing stylistic, grammatical, lexical, intertestamental, intracanonical and literary consistency to the finished *TNIV* Bible. It will soon be sent out for typesetting and proofreading, and publication will take place on a launch date still to be determined. If God will be pleased to have blessed our efforts during the fourteen years we have spent on the project, we want to be careful to give him all the glory and praise.

Here, then, are a few examples of fresh renderings prompted by advancing knowledge in various departments of biblical studies and by changes that have taken place in the English language over the past several decades. I will provide representative samples from reasonably well-known texts, restricting myself to the first three books of the Old Testament.

* * * * *

Genesis 1:26-27: Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created human

¹¹It was adopted by the Committee on November 29, 1968. Passages cited above may be found on pp. 1-4 of the document; cf. further the two-page "Position Paper of the Committee on Bible Translation" that had already been issued on July 11, 1967.

beings in his own image, / in the image of God he created them; / male and female he created them.

Stylistic changes from the *NIV* include in this case “the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky” replacing “the fish of the sea and the birds of the air,” which, however familiar and therefore difficult to abandon, are nevertheless literal genitival Hebraisms that turn out to be more “Biblish” than English.

The phrase “human beings” in both verses bears the footnote “Hebrew *adam*, traditionally *man*,” calling attention to the way in which *’ d m* has almost always been rendered in this crucial passage. The Hebrew term has no plural form; its singularity or plurality must thus be determined by context. Interestingly enough, A. H. Strong’s *Englishman’s Concordance*, now more than a century old, contains on page 8 the following definition, which I quote in full: “*ruddy*, i.e. *a human being* (an individual or the species, *mankind*, etc.):— another, + hypocrite, + common sort, low, man (mean, of low degree), person.” We observe that this older lexicon places the “traditional” rendering “man” almost at the end of its list of definitions and foregrounds “human being” as its preferred English gloss—in any event, the primary translation in most Hebrew dictionaries both old and new.¹² So the *TNIV* “human beings” in Genesis 1:26 would appear to be right on target, and the choice of the plural is due to the governing verb three Hebrew words later: *v yirdû*, a third-person plural jussive form

appropriately translated “and let *them* rule.” That sets the stage for our translation of verse 27, the first snatch of poetry in the Bible, an exquisite tricolon in which the Hebrew

¹²Cf., e.g., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (ed. D. J. A. Clines; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), I.123-124; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (rev. W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm; Leiden: Brill, 1994), I.14.

has the luxury of being able to play on the singular/plural ambiguity of ' *d m* that is impossible in contemporary English. So both ' *tô* and ' *t m* are best rendered as plurals in the interest of clarity, especially since the context further defines them as "male and female." To use the traditional English gloss "man" in Genesis 1:26-27 is to compromise, and even to obscure, Moses' intention for increasingly large numbers of readers, both male and female. In any event, "[b]y the middle of the nineteenth century, most people in Great Britain and America apparently agreed . . . that *man* is equivalent to *male*, at least in their interpretation of statute law. As part of his strategy on behalf of women's suffrage, John Stuart Mill proposed that the term *person* replace the term *man* in the Reform Bill of 1867, an Act of Parliament extending the franchise to certain males previously denied the vote. Today it is tantalizing to think of the difference that single change in terminology might have made."¹³ Bruce Waltke writes as follows: "When I teach at Reformed Theological Seminary in Florida, I can still use generic 'man' without being misunderstood, but when I teach at Regent College, most students, according to opinion polls, hear only 'male.' For them 'man' or 'he,' when the biblical writer intended humankind, is inaccurate. 'Blessed is the man' in Psalm 1 includes men and women, but Regent College students hear it as excluding women. In singing 'Stand [U]p, O Men of God,' to my dismay a Philadelphia song-leader had the men, not the women, stand. For these audiences, 'man' in Psalm 1:1 is an inaccurate translation."¹⁴ Further on Psalm 1:1, Don Carson notes that " 'Blessed is the man who does not . . . stand in the way of sinners' (Ps 1:1 NIV) is a shockingly poor rendering of the Hebrew, because to stand in someone's way in English means 'to hinder someone,'

¹³C. Miller and K. Swift, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing* (2d ed.; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), pp. 12-13.

¹⁴B. Waltke, "Personal Reflections on the *TNIV*" (unpublished paper, 2002), pp. 1-2.

whereas the thought in Hebrew is ‘to walk in someone’s footsteps,’ . . . or, less metaphorically, ‘to adopt someone else’s lifestyle and values and habits.’¹⁵

Anticipating this eminently valid objection in terms of current English, the *TNIV* had already rendered as follows: “Blessed are those / who do not . . . / stand in the way that sinners take.” In the interests of clarity, other recent translations also abandon a word-for-word treatment of the Hebrew idiom to eliminate the misleading ambiguity in English.

Genesis 6:9: This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.

Two additions to the *NIV* text were made in this verse: (1) We added “and his family” to bring out the procreative nuance of the Hebrew word *tôl dôl*, which serves as both a *Stichwort* and a leitmotiv in Genesis. It occurs at the ten major junctures of the book and carries generational and/or genealogical connotations, which are picked up in the word “family.” (2)

We inserted “faithfully” in the phrase “walked with God” to indicate that the idiom is metaphorical and does not reflect a merely casual stroll. In a number of texts where “walk in the ways of” occurs we rendered “walk in obedience to,” “follow the ways of,” and the like, to bring

out the faithfulness-in-conduct nuance of the phrase.

Genesis 10:10: “Erech” here and elsewhere became “Uruk,” the spelling of the ancient city’s name that is now used universally in history books and the like. This is in keeping with the modernization and simplification of the spelling of proper nouns already begun by the *NIV* twenty-five years ago. Many such spelling changes have been made in the *TNIV*, notable examples of which include Sukkoth instead of Succoth, Molek for

¹⁵D. A. Carson, “Limits,” p. 94.

Molech, Marduk-Baladan for Merodach-Baladan, Awel-Marduk instead of Evil-Merodach (which is especially susceptible to misunderstanding for obvious reasons), Iyim for the impossible Iim, and, perhaps most helpfully, Harran (the place-name), which could easily be confused with the personal name Haran for many readers. Interestingly enough, the *KJV* had already spelled the place-name as Charran in Acts 7:2, 4, based on its scrupulously careful transliterations of proper nouns, whether from the Hebrew or the Greek. Like the *KJV*, however, the *TNIV* has not tampered with the traditional Protestant spelling of well-known personal names. Yeshayahu is still Isaiah, Yirmeyahu is still Jeremiah, and Moshe is still Moses.

Genesis 12:1: Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

This rendering replaces the *NIV*'s "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." In the interests of English style, the *NIV* had unnecessarily expanded the key Hebrew phrase *lek-l k*—the imperative "go" plus the so-called

ethical dative construction, so something like "go (to your [dis]advantage)"¹⁶—rendering it as "Leave . . . and go" But when I reminded our Committee that this particular combination of

otherwise ubiquitous words and particles—*lek-l k*—is found, incredibly enough, only here and in Genesis 22:2 and that its two occurrences frame the story of Abraham's life, the Committee members immediately agreed to the change, thus beginning the sentence

¹⁶The medieval commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomoh ben Yitzchak) explains that "go for yourself" means "go for your pleasure," "for your benefit" (*The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary: Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated* [Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1999], 1.116).

with “Go” rather than “Leave.” This observation in turn led to the following modification:

Genesis 22:2: Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah.” Just as God turns up the heat on Abram in 12:1—“Go from your country, your people . . . your father’s household”—so he does the same to Abraham in 22:2: “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go” The

twofold promise of property and progeny would be fulfilled in Abraham’s life only when he

learned how much it would cost him in terms of faith and commitment. *Lek-l k*.

Genesis 13:10, 14: The Hebrew phrase *nāšû ‘ênayim*, often translated simply “lift up [one’s] eyes,” presents a rather bizarre image when rendered in that way. The *NIV* translated it literally in *Genesis 13:14* (“Lift up your eyes”) but idiomatically in v. 10 (“[Lot] looked up”). The Akkadian cognate expression *na našû* bears the specific sense of “look intentionally, look

for something, covet”¹⁷—a nuance that works nicely in *Genesis 13*. So the *TNIV* in v. 10 states that greedy Lot “looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered,” and in v. 14 it says the following: “The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, ‘Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west.’” The echo between the two verses is thus preserved, with Lot coveting and with Abram looking intentionally.

¹⁷*The Assyrian Dictionary* (ed. J. A. Brinkman *et al.*; Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1980), 11.104.

Genesis 31:21: In the *NIV* “the River” (with a capital “R”) bears a footnote that reads “That is, the Euphrates.” The *TNIV* inserts “Euphrates” into the text itself, thereby honoring authorial intent and eliminating the need for a footnote, which most readers would not look at anyway. Many such geographical clarifications can be found in the *TNIV*.

Genesis 40:19: “Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale you on a pole.”

This is a significant improvement and reflects a more likely understanding of the idiom’s intent. The *NIV* translated the phrase with the traditional “hang you on a tree,” placing “impale you on a pole” in a footnote. The Hebrew word for “tree” can refer to anything made of wood, and in any event “hang on a tree” evokes images of lynching or, horror of horrors, draping a body over a branch. Execution of rebels or criminals in the ancient world was usually effected by decapitation, and the headless corpse was then impaled on a sharpened stake and exposed, often atop the city wall, as a deterrent warning to other potential enemies of the state. Roman

crucifixion was simply a diabolically sophisticated and cruel variant of impaling, and thus Jesus’ death as portrayed in Galatians 3:13 is indeed a grisly reflection of the curse described in Deuteronomy 21:23, where the *TNIV* translates “anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse.”

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Exodus 3:15: This is my name forever, / this is the name you shall call me / from generation to generation.

The *NIV* preserves the more traditional rendering here: “This is my name forever, / the

name by which I am to be remembered / from generation to generation.” But as it turns out, the Hebrew root *zkr* does not always mean “remember.” I was doing an exegesis of Exodus 3 several years ago when I again encountered v. 15, and I suddenly recalled the opening lines of the so-called Babylonian creation epic: *En ma eliš l nabû šam m / [u] šapliš ammatum šumam l zakrat*, which being rendered from its Akkadian hymnal-epic dialect in amphibrachic tetrameter into a corresponding English format would sound something like this: “Above when as yet there existed no heaven, below no firm earth had yet come into being” Akkadian *šumum* is cognate to Hebrew *š m*, and *zakrat* is a stative form of the verb *zak ru*, “to call.” *Šumam l zakrat* thus means “had not been called by name,” which I have rendered contextually as “had [not] come into being.” The pertinent passage in Exodus 3:15 might be read literally as follows: “This (is) my name [*š m*] forever, / and this (is) my title [*z ker*] from generation to generation”—surely not “this (is) my remembrance from generation to generation,” whence the *NIV*’s circumlocution “this is the name by which I am to be remembered.” In other words, when

š m is found in parallelism or context with the root *zkr*, and especially with the noun *z ker*, the translator needs to be alerted to the possibility that *zkr* in such cases probably means “(to) name, call, title” or the like. The *NRSV*, among others, renders the pertinent clause as follows: “and this is my title for all generations.” I applaud the translators for recognizing the sense of the passage, but “title” in this case is not quite right since *YHWH* is God’s name, not his title. In Hosea 12:5 the *NIV* translates *YHWH zikrô* as “the LORD is his name of renown” in a somewhat awkward attempt to combine name and remembrance. The *TNIV* renders, more simply, “the LORD is his name.”

Exodus 16:34: The word “Testimony,” when it refers to the tent or the ark or the tablets, has now become “(tablets of the) covenant law” throughout. This decision results

from a new understanding of the Hebrew word ‘*dût*, which is clearly cognate to its ancient Semitic congeners that always have covenantal connotations. In addition, of course, “testimony” is a word that would be variously interpreted by modern readers, usually in the wrong way.

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The book of Leviticus presents us with an excellent opportunity to tackle one of the most nettlesome problems facing Bible translators today—namely, how best to deal with passages in which gender accuracy is especially desirable if not mandatory. Where an anointed priest is in view, such as in Leviticus 4:16-21 and elsewhere, “he/him/his” are the appropriate pronouns to use in current English, referring as they do to the male of the species. The same is true for leaders of the community, as in verses 22-24. But how about “a member of the community,” as in 4:27—or, to make matters completely perspicuous, “a person,” as in 5:1, where the Hebrew

equivalent is *nefeš* (ironically, a noun of feminine gender, like the Spanish *la persona*)?¹⁸

Translators handle verses like Leviticus 5:1 in various ways, as might be expected. (1) We begin with the *NIV*, which is typically traditional in this respect: “If a person does not speak up . . . , he will be held responsible.” (2) *NRSV*: “When any of you . . . does not speak up, you are subject to punishment” (see also *CEV*; *GW*). (3) *NLT*: “If any of the people . . . refuse to testify, they will be held responsible.” In other words, some translations keep the masculine singular pronouns and hope that the reader will know that they refer also to women; some switch

¹⁸E. V. Goetchius’ seminal statement is well worth underscoring: Gender in a language “is a **grammatical** category, not a physiological one; gender is *not* the same thing as sex” (*The Language of the New Testament* [New York: Scribner’s, 1965], §37) (emphases his).

to second-person pronouns and verbs, since in any event the entire community is being directly addressed (as Moses' own introduction in Leviticus 1:1-2 makes clear); and others use generic plural forms, assuming that the average intelligent reader will understand that such forms are notional plurals that refer to individuals within a class and not to groups of people. Each of these three expedients has its own possible pitfalls and is subject to its own potential pratfalls. There is, of course, a fourth possibility, but to my knowledge it has not been seriously considered by Bible translators because of its propensity for producing grotesqueries similar to the following: "The task of the exegete is incomplete, therefore, if he or she has restricted their endeavours to the establishment of a text of a biblical book . . . and determined the period and location of its origins. He or she will only have achieved their purpose 'when they have explained the meaning

of the biblical text as God's word for today.'"¹⁹ In other words, the repetition of "he/she" and/or "he or she" merely exacerbates the problem.

In addition to using all of the three major methods mentioned above, the *TNIV* has added another option: "If anyone sins because they do not speak up . . . , they must bear their responsibility." The advantage of this solution in many situations is that it preserves third-person individuality ("anyone") while avoiding the gender-specific "he/him/his" and at the same time utilizing the generic third-person pronouns "they/them/their." The disadvantage is that use of generic third-person pronouns in this way—the singular "they/them/their" when employed in this specialized role—grates on the sensibilities of many purist grammarians. But the argument that

¹⁹G. Van Belle, "Dialogue," pp. 6-7.

such use eliminates intended individuality won't wash, of course—and that for a number of reasons. The singular “they/them/their” gets its singularity from its antecedent (in this case

“anyone,” which is itself singular) since the antecedent noun always determines the number of its resumptive pronoun, not the other way around. Furthermore, the singular “they/them/their” has a long and venerable history that precedes even the *KJV*, which itself contains at least a half-dozen occurrences. Lists of examples from the recent and remote past can be found in a number of places, so let me give you my list of just the top ten, David Letterman style: (10) Chaucer in *The Pardoner's Prologue* (ca. AD 1395): “And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame / They wol come up.” (9) William Shakespeare in *Comedy of Errors*: “There's not a man I meet but doth salute me, / As if I were their well-accustomed friend.” (8) Lyndesay in *Auld Man & Wife*

(ca. 1540): Quha wald haif weir [Whoever wants war] God send thame littill rest.” (7) Chesterfield (1759): “If a person is born of a gloomy temper . . . they cannot help it.” (6) George Bernard Shaw (1898): “It's enough to drive anyone out of their senses.” (5) C. S. Lewis in *Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”*: “She kept her head and kicked her shoes off, as everybody ought to do who falls into deep water in their clothes.” (4) Jane Austen in *Emma* (1815): “Who makes you their confidant?” (3) W. M. Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* (1848): “A person can't help their birth.”²⁰ (2) Matthew 18:35 *KJV* (1611): “. . . if ye from your hearts forgive not every one

²⁰For these first eight examples I am indebted to various secondary sources: S. Zuber and A. M. Reed, “The Politics of Grammar Handbooks: Generic *He* and Singular *They*,” *College English* (1993), pp. 515-527; *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1994), pp. 105, 416, 901-903; W. Leman, E-mail message (January 24, 2003).

his brother their trespasses.” And finally, (1) Philippians 2:3: “*Let nothing be done* through strife or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”²¹ In this example the singular “themselves” resumes the singular “each.” Additional examples could be multiplied endlessly from further writings of the above authors as well as from such distinguished literati and literatae as Lord Byron, Edith Wharton, Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Herbert Spencer, Thomas De Quincey, Henry Fielding, Gertrude Stein, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Virginia Woolf, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Emily Brontë, John Ruskin, Oscar Wilde, Willa Cather, and so on.

Over the course of the past several months, I collected scores of current examples of singular “they/them/their” during my casual reading of professional and popular pieces as well as listening to how educated people in all walks of life actually use the English language. Here are the top ten, a small sample that could easily be multiplied many times over: (10) Southern Baptist pastor W. Wray Wheelless giving the invitation at the close of the morning worship service at Kailua Baptist Church on September 14, 2003: “If anyone senses the need to accept Christ, we invite them to make that need known.” (9) Dr. Jerry Falwell in a videotape of a 1988 Old Time Gospel Hour service shown on TV recently: “If a student wanted to enroll at this late hour, as a student this fall at Liberty University, what should they do?” (8) “Does Anyone Really Know If They Are Saved?” is the title of an article published in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2002, pp. 37-59) by Ken Keathley, assistant professor of theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. (7) In a sermon preached at First

²¹That the *KJV* resorted to italics thousands of times from Genesis through Revelation is clear testimony to the fact that its committee recognized interpretation as an integral and indispensable component of the translation process.

Presbyterian Church, Honolulu, on October 19, 2003, the Rev. Ian Farrell said, “Building a friendship with

somebody means getting to know them.” (6) Bill Gates as quoted in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* (June 2, 2003, p. C1): “Everybody values their family and cherishes the time they have with their kids and their parents.” (5) In a Salvation Army commercial on CNN on April 28,

2003: “When you help someone rebuild their life, everyone feels better.” (4) A news item the day after the recall election defeating California Governor Gray Davis as reported in *The Honolulu Advertiser* (October 8, 2003, p. A6): “Within five days of county certification, any registered voter can request a recount if they’re willing to pay for the process.” (3) From a recent brochure advertising the *NET Bible* and its website: “When someone is interested in a topic, their

searches and our high rankings will bring people to your works directly!” (2) Ruth Bell Graham: “There are two kinds of hypocrites in the world, one who wants you to think that they are better than they are and one who wants you to think they are worse than they are. . . . [W]hile Jesus was here on earth, no one came to Him for healing without Jesus healing them.” Finally—and it was bound to happen—(1) the title of a book written by John Ortberg and published by Zondervan: *Everybody’s Normal Till You Get to Know Them*.

Carol White is one of the most literate college librarians I have ever met. Two weeks ago she reported to me a conversation in which she began a sentence like this: “If your best friend shaves their head. . . .” When I asked her why she had used the pronoun “their,” she said it was because she did not know whether the young man she was talking to meant a boy or a girl.

If you were to ask me whether I am completely comfortable with all instances of singular “they/them/their,” I would respond negatively. But at the same time I am getting used to it, especially when I see and hear it used by all kinds of people in all walks of life. Indeed, I find myself using it now and then without even realizing it. In any event, it is one of the approaches the *TNIV* has adopted to solve a problem everyone struggles with.

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These are merely selected examples of the kinds of changes in the text implemented by our Committee on Bible Translation. Other readings that might be of interest include the fact that we no longer “sprinkle” blood “against” the altar, we now “splash” it “against the sides of” the altar. “Offal” has become “dung,” as awful as that might seem. “Infectious” skin diseases and now “defiling” skin diseases, which underscores the religious and ceremonial nature of the illness rather than its potential—and in some cases highly unlikely—contagion. “Aliens” are now “foreigners” to avoid mistaking them for extraterrestrial visitants. “Shadow of death” has become “utter darkness,” since the traditional rendering was based on a false etymology. The Hebrew word *Sheol* has been removed from the explanatory footnote register and has most often become “the realm of the dead” in the text. “Stoned” now reads “stoned to death” or the like to keep it from being confused with drug addiction. “Flutes” are now “pipes” and “tambourines” are now “timbrels,” both in order to describe in a more precise way the nature of those ancient musical instruments. And so the changes multiplied as our Committee pored over the biblical text in excruciatingly minute detail.

In sum, then, versions that claim in their prefaces to be “essentially literal” or “word-for-word” or “transparent to the original text”²² are in danger of exhibiting opacity

²²As does, e.g., the *ESV* in its preface.

rather than clarity. In practice, of course, such translations turn out to be not at all what they claim to be. M. Silva rightly states that to call their typical renderings “*literal* (let alone word-for-word) is a fantasy.”²³ Mark Strauss similarly affirms that “[a]n ‘essentially literal’ translation – either lexically or syntactically – is a myth.”²⁴ As Don Carson notes, “a translation is poor if by preserving formal equivalence in word order or syntactical construction or the like it obscures the meaning of the original text or transmutes it into something quite different or remains completely opaque to

those whose tongue is the receptor language. . . . [T]here are several goals the translator must bear in mind, including both accuracy and comprehensibility. To focus all one’s attention on the former (understood in the fashion of the most ‘direct’ translation theories) at the expense of the latter is no virtue; to focus all one’s attention on the latter at the expense of the former is betrayal.”²⁵

Fifteen years ago I wrote the following: “To render the Greek word *sarx* by ‘flesh’ virtually every time it appears does not require the services of a translator; all one needs is a dictionary (or, better yet, a computer). But to recognize that *sarx* has different connotations in different contexts, that in addition to ‘flesh’ it often means ‘human standards’ or ‘earthly descent’ or ‘sinful nature’ or ‘sexual impulse’ or ‘person,’ etc., and therefore to translate *sarx* in a variety of ways is to understand that translation is not only a mechanical, word-for-word process but also a nuanced, thought-for-thought procedure. Translation, as any expert in the field will readily admit, is just as much an art as it is a science. Word-for-word translations typically demonstrate great respect for the source language . . . but often

²³M. Silva, “Are Translators Traitors?”, pp. 39-40 (italics his).

²⁴M. Strauss, “Form, Function,” pp. 16-17.

²⁵D. A. Carson, “Limits,” p. 94.

pay only lip service to the requirements of the target language. . . . When translators of scripture insist on reproducing every lexical and grammatical element in their English renderings, the results are often grotesque.”²⁶ Herb Wolf asserted that “at times it is necessary to move away from a literal translation, so that the message of the scriptures can be clearly communicated. The NIV has

been cautious when it has departed from a ‘literal’ rendering, but its willingness to do so has markedly enhanced its overall accuracy.”²⁷ Walt Wessel observed that “the two Wycliffite translations (the first in 1384, and the second at the end of the same year) made the whole Bible accessible to English readers in their own language for the first time.” He then went on to state that Wycliffe’s secretary, John Purvey, “was no doubt responsible for much of the translation. In the *General Prologue*, a tract commending the second Wycliffe Bible, Purvey set down some principles of Bible translation that remain valid and important to this day:

First, it is to be known that the best translating out of Latin into English is to
translate after the sentence [meaning] and not only after the words, so the
sentence be as open [clear] or opener, in English as in Latin, and go not far
from the letter;
and if the letter may not be followed in the translating, let the sentence be
ever whole and open, for the words ought to serve the intent and sentence, or
else the words be superfluous or false.”

²⁶R. Youngblood, “The New International Version was published in 1978—this is the story of why, and how,” *The Standard* (November 1988), p. 18.

²⁷H. M. Wolf, “When ‘Literal’ Is Not Accurate,” in *The Making of a Contemporary Translation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), pp. 183, 188.

Wessel concludes: “It is not surprising that the second Wycliffe Bible, whose translator(s) followed Purvey’s principles and thereby produced a far more readable Bible, had more success than the first one, which was a literal, wooden translation.”²⁸ As Dick France comments on the same topic, “Purvey’s revised translation (rather than the earlier Wycliffe version) continued . . .

to be widely read and circulated. It was, in effect, *the* English Bible throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.”²⁹ At the dawn of the seventeenth century, the Preface to the *KJV* followed in Wycliffe’s train: “Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.”³⁰

Fifty years ago Donald Grey Barnhouse began an important article as follows: “I have heard a great deal about the new Revised Standard Version of the Bible during the past months and have found some people who are fanatically against it and some people who are fanatically for it. I have put a very telling question to many of them. ‘Have you read it completely?’ In no case did I receive an affirmative answer. . . . I have now completed the reading of the RSV Bible. . . . My question concerns the content of the RSV, and whether it is an accurate translation of the Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments, and whether its

²⁸W. W. Wessel, “A Translator’s Perspective on Alister McGrath’s History of the King James Version,” in *Challenge*, pp. 201-202.

²⁹R. T. France, “The Bible in English: An Overview,” in *Challenge*, pp. 180-181.

³⁰Cited, e.g., in “The Translators to the Reader: Preface to the King James Version,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Fall 1996), p. 274

mistakes and errors are such that it is untrustworthy for an individual to read. Most of the opinions that have been given on this subject have been given by men who have not read the book they are criticizing. . . . No translation of the Bible is perfect. If the King James Version appeared today for the first time, it would be possible to . . . say that the translators did not believe in the Trinity because, by implication, they deny the personality of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8:26, where the King James calls the Holy Spirit “*Itself*” instead of “*Himself*.” . . . But does this error nullify all of the good

qualities of the 1611 Bible? Certainly not.”³¹ Barnhouse proceeds to point out the good qualities of the *RSV* as well as its bad qualities. In spite of the latter, however, he states that “the *Revised Standard Version* is one of the best translations ever made of either the Old or the New

Testaments. If it were put into the hands of an unsaved man, he could easily be led to a knowledge of Christ through its reading. If a man had no other translation and started to write a Biblical theology, he would come, with no other tool, to the doctrines of the Trinity, the virgin birth of our Lord, the person and work of the Saviour, and the inspiration of the Bible. . . . Young people brought up in our pagan America, outside the bounds of rich Bible study and thus

deprived of a close acquaintance with the Word of God, may catch on fire from studying this version.”³² Thus did Donald Grey Barnhouse express his heartfelt appreciation for a contemporary Bible translation that was being pilloried on every side.³³

³¹D. G. Barnhouse, “I Have Read the RSV,” *Eternity* (June 1953), p. 10.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 12.

³³For a perceptive analysis of why evangelicals so often criticize one another over the process and practice of Bible translation see T. Longman III, “Accuracy and Readability: Warring Impulses in Evangelical Translation Tradition,” in *Biblical Translation in Context* (ed. F. W. Knobloch; Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2002), pp. 165-175.

As a young man I had the privilege of hearing Barnhouse in person on only one occasion. I was accompanied by the other two members of the New Look Trio. At one point in his sermon Barnhouse told a very subtle joke, and we three singers laughed out loud—the only ones in the packed-out sanctuary to do so. Barnhouse looked over in our direction, broke into an ever-so-slight smile, and winked at us.

When the service ended, I walked to the front to meet him. After I introduced myself and thanked him for his message, he said to me in his characteristic and thundering bass growl, “Ronald, have you been born again?” A bit taken aback at the question, I nevertheless responded, “Why yes, sir, I have.” He smiled and growled one more time: “Then get into the Word.”

So I did.