



Why produce your own translation?

Biblical scholar Paula Gooder reflects on why she often produces her own translation of Scripture. Translating a passage afresh allows the different levels of potential meaning to be highlighted in a way not possible if we just use published translations.



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As a biblical scholar I am often invited to give Bible readings, or expositions of Scripture. When I do I often produce my own translation, which I then read before I begin. This often causes comment. People are intrigued by my motivation for doing it. By doing this, they ask, am I implying that there is something wrong with the published translations? Do I think my translation is better in some way? And sometimes, isn't it somewhat arrogant to produce your own translation when so many perfectly good and widely accepted translations exist already? My answer to these questions is no, no and I hope not. The reasons for producing my own translation of Scripture are many and varied but none of them arise from a sense that existing translations lack something which my own translations can rectify.

Savouring the Text

My primary reason for translating from scratch is simply so that I can savour the text more effectively. No matter how hard one tries it is very difficult to read the Bible slowly and carefully, especially if we already know the passage. It is all too easy to skip ahead, knowing what the text says and supplying the details we know to exist, without actually reading the text itself. Reading in another language is often a slower process and requires more attention to detail than can be achieved while reading in English. As a result, it is easier to savour what it actually says and to notice the small details which, otherwise, might be missed.

One striking example of this occurred to me when I was reading the parable of the Good Samaritan. This is a

classic example of a passage we know so well that we already know what Luke was saying. When preparing for this Bible study, I read the parable confident in the knowledge of what we all know – that Jesus was instructing us to act like the Good Samaritan and to care for all those we meet. When I read it slowly in Greek, however, I kept on tripping up over the lawyer's question about the neighbour and the subsequent answer given after the parable.

The logic of the passage runs as follows. The lawyer approaches Jesus wanting to know what to do to inherit eternal life (Lk 10.25; a trick question designed to get Jesus to declare whether he had leanings more to the Sadducees or the Pharisees); Jesus' response asks the lawyer to reflect on his own expertise about what Scripture might have to say to this question (Lk 10.26). The lawyer's answer involves a well-known summary of the law which brings together quotations from Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18. Jesus agrees and moves the lawyer's original question on from 'inheriting eternal life' to 'do this and you will live' (i.e. transforming the question from passive to active, and from something that may happen in the future to something more present).

At this point the Lawyer asks who his neighbour is and this gives rise to the telling of the well-known and well-loved parable. At the end of the parable Jesus again changes the lawyer's original question by asking not, 'who was his neighbour' (Lk 10.29) but 'who was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers' (Lk 10.36). The answer, of course, is the Samaritan. So, according to the logic of the lawyer's question, the

person that the lawyer was to love was the one who acted as neighbour, in other words the one from whom help was received. With this twist – by and large not remarked upon by biblical commentators – the parable becomes a more profound reflection on the intertwined nature of relationship. Of course, Jesus was commanding that we act with compassion towards strangers in the same way as the Samaritan acted, but, at the same time, he was also issuing a challenge, requiring us to receive help as well as to give it, and to love those whose unexpected offers of help shake us out of our preconceived prejudices and preconceptions.

The very simple action of savouring the text can be achieved in all sorts of ways (popular modern methods of engaging with Scripture such as Ignatian spirituality and *lectio divina* encourage a similar approach) but is something that I engage with again and again whenever I translate the text for myself.

Lost in Translation

An equally important reason for re-translating the text is that, no matter how good a translation is, it simply cannot communicate all the shades of meaning in the original. One of the well-known challenges of translation is the recognition that no one language can map straightforwardly onto another. Each act of translation both diminishes and adds meaning. It diminishes meaning in that it is impossible to communicate all shades of meaning from the first language into the second language, so you lose a lot in the translation (add to this what we lose in transferring a word from the first century to the twenty-first century and the original is much diminished). Then in the new language the particular word chosen to render any given word carries with it whole new shades of meaning which were not there originally and hence take the translation in a whole new direction.

One of the most important examples of this is what happens to the Greek word *diakonia* (and its cognates) in translation. The word occurs in the New Testament in three major forms *diakonos* (most often translated as servant, minister or deacon); *diakonia* (translated as service or ministry) and *diakoneo* (to serve or to minister). It is obvious that the alternative translations have very different resonances and this is due largely to the fact that they were used both in the everyday Graeco-Roman world for a common role (that of servants and what they did) and in the early Christian communities for a particular act undertaken in and for the community (ministers and deacons). The challenge for any translator, then, is to work out whether to emphasise the resonance of the word as servant or minister/deacon. Certain iconic New Testament texts would sound very different if different decisions were made. Take, for example, Mark 10.45 which could be translated as, 'The Son of Man came not to be ministered to but to minister ...', or, 'The Son of Man came not to receive the ministry of a deacon but to

act as a deacon ...'. The sense of the verse feels very different depending on the shade of meaning the translator chooses to use. In this instance it is blatantly obvious that that the traditional translations were correct. But this is not always the case. Sometimes an alternative translation provides a greater depth to our understanding of the passage which otherwise might go unnoticed.

Two examples illustrate this well. Staying with *diakonia* for a moment, there is one verse which uses this word but which is never translated in the way that other instances of this verb are. The passage is a famous one – the story of Mary and Martha when Jesus visits their home. In the story the actions of Mary and Martha are contrasted (Lk 10.38–42): Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to his teaching, whereas Martha was busy and complained about the lack of help. The

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NIV translates this as, 'Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made', and the NRSV as, 'Martha was distracted by her many tasks.' In neither of these translations would it be possible to discern that the Greek said that 'Martha was distracted by much *diakonian*.' The ESV is much more helpful here translating the verse as, 'Martha was distracted with much serving'; but if we were to take it one step further and translate it as, 'Martha was distracted (or worried) with much ministry', the passage then takes on a much sharper and relevant edge to many involved in the church today.

My point here is not that either the NIV or the NRSV are wrong – they bring out an essential message of the passage – but that they have not captured the whole possible meaning of the narrative here. Unless we are clear, as the ESV is, that this verse uses the same word as Mark uses in 10.45 then we miss one of the key points that Luke is making here which is that true Christian discipleship requires a careful balance between serving and receiving. Of course, Christians are called to serve but sometimes, as here, the serving can distract from listening to Jesus. It might be that those of us engaged in ministry need to hear the much sharper version that Martha missed her chance to listen to Jesus because she was distracted by ministry. Translating a passage afresh allows the different levels of potential meaning to be highlighted in a way not possible if we just use published translations.

Another example of this is more important theologically. One of Paul's most significant statements in his second letter to the Corinthians can be found in 2 Corinthians 5.17. Here translations divide over how to translate the verse. The NIV and ESV say, 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' and, 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a

new creation', respectively; whereas the NRSV goes for, 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation', and the TNIV, 'if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come.' At first glance this is a question of inclusive language. The NRSV is trying to avoid the word 'he' and so goes for 'there' instead. However, there is an enormous theological difference between saying, 'if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation' and, 'if anyone is in Christ, there is now new creation.' One is talking simply about the new identity of a person in Christ; the other is talking about a cosmic transformation.

So which is correct? The answer is that it is impossible to say. The Greek says simply, 'If anyone in Christ new creation'; either option would be a correct translation of the Greek. The context is no great help since in verse 16, Paul talks about knowing Christ now no longer in the flesh (which suggests that he would go on to talk about a person's transformation in Christ) and in the second half of verse 17 about the old passing away (which

- "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." (NIV–UK)
- Jesus said, 'Woman, what do you want from me? My hour has not come yet.' (NJB)
- Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." (NKJV)
- "How does that concern you and me?" Jesus asked. "My time has not yet come." (NLT)
- And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." (NRSV)
- And Jesus said to her, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." (RSV)
- "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." (TNIV)

Nearly every translation has, here, decided to give Jesus' question a slightly different flavour. Some try to soften his tone (with 'dear woman' and use of the word concern); some harden the tone (with 'what do you want from me?') but all have to try and do something to make sense of a verse that otherwise is almost impossible to understand.

Producing my own translation in this kind of context means that I can direct people back to exactly what the Greek says without worrying about what it means because I will go on to explain the issues later. This allows for a much greater accuracy than most published translations can aim for.

Conclusions

The real reason for translating a passage again myself, is because I love reading the Scriptures in the original Hebrew and Greek and, having done so, am keen to communicate the depth and richness of the text in its original language with those to whom I speak. My translations are no better than any of the other published translations and in many ways they are worse than them. The published English translations are the product of years of careful study and translation by some of the best scholars in the field. But any translation can communicate only a small fraction of the resonances and allusions of the original text. What I seek to do is to widen that just a little and by doing so to widen very slightly our ability to understand what the text is saying. Translation is not an exact science and even were there to be thousands more translations of the Bible we would not be able to capture entirely the full wonder of the depth and breadth of God's word to us today. But this is precisely why translation and re-translation is so important. We cannot ever hope to achieve a perfect translation but we can immerse ourselves ever deeper in God's Word and that is something that is never wasted.

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suggests he has a cosmic understanding in mind). This pushes me to the view that both are right. Paul is a sophisticated Greek speaker and could, if he chose, make it very clear which one he meant. Since he didn't, the implication is that he meant both: if anyone is in Christ that person is transformed and so is the cosmos.

Again, what re-translation achieves here is a clearer insight into what is going on in the Greek and why the major – and much respected – English translations have made different decisions about their own translation.

Meaning over Accuracy?

Another factor is the well-known translators' conundrum of whether it is more important to be accurate to the Greek or more important to communicate the meaning of the passage. In an ideal world one can do both. Most translators would admit, however, that there are times when this is simply not possible. One of the best illustrations of this is the vexed – but very important – verse in John 2.4 where Mary informs Jesus that there is no more wine and Jesus says, literally in Greek, 'Woman, what to you and to me?' This is one of those occasions where accuracy is unhelpful since that question means very little until more tone and content are provided. The problem is that the text gives no hint as to tone and content and so translators are left to decide for themselves what it should be. A list of the major options illustrates the problem here:

- And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." (ESV)
- And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has not yet come." (NASV)