

A FREE GRACE PERSPECTIVE ON BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

BOB WILKIN

Editor

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I. INTRODUCTION

Recently there have been a number of journal articles written evaluating modern Bible translations in light of theological concerns, their handling of the Old and New Testaments, and in terms of their use of English style.¹

Since I have often been asked what translation or translations I recommend and why, I thought writing an article might prove to be of interest. In this article I evaluate five major translations in terms of how they handle passages of special interest to the Grace message.

Bible translations are so massive as to make evaluating the entire translation impossible. A reasonable approach is to select a manageable number of verses that deal with our theological concern, the Free Grace perspective, and compare how each translates the verses. Before we do that, I will make some general comments about the translations which I evaluate, the NIV, NASB, NET (*The NET Bible*), KJV, and NKJV.

II. GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE FIVE TRANSLATIONS REVIEWED

Of the five, the NIV and NET are the freest in terms of their translation style. They are not really paraphrases of the text as are *The Living*

¹ See, for example, Michael A. Lyons and William A. Tooman, "Three Recent Bible Translations: An Old Testament Perspective," *JETS* (September 2003): 497-520; Peter H. Davids, "Three Recent Bible Translations: A New Testament Perspective," *JETS* (September 2003): 521-32; Daniel E. Ritchie, "Three Recent Bible Translations: A Literary and Stylistic Perspective," *JETS* (September 2003): 533-45.

Bible and The Message. However, at times they do a fair amount of paraphrasing. They both use a thought for thought translation style, which is called *dynamic equivalence*.

In their book, *The NIV Reconsidered*, Hodges and Radmacher suggest that dynamic equivalence is sometimes necessary and that it isn't objectionable in itself.² "When all is said and done," they write, "it is the issue of accuracy that matters above everything else."³ The authors then proceed to give many examples of where the NIV is inaccurate.

In the back of the NET the translators state the principles they used in translation. There they say that this translation is somewhere between formal equivalence ("word for word") and dynamic equivalence. The NET translators indicate some of the techniques they used including, breaking up "long, complicated sentences in the original languages...into shorter sentences more acceptable in contemporary English;" "Nouns have been used for pronouns where the English pronoun would be obscure or ambiguous to a modern reader;" "In places where passive constructions create ambiguity, obscurity, or awkwardness in contemporary English, either the agent has been specified from context or the construction has been changed to active voice in the English translation, with an explanatory note."⁴ Additionally, the NET replaces gender exclusive language (men, mankind,⁵ brethren, etc.) with gender inclusive language (mortals, as in Ps 9:20, human race, as in Job 12:10, brothers and sisters, as in Gal 1:11, etc.) whenever the Greek or Hebrew generically uses the masculine gender.

While the text itself reads somewhat like the NIV, the NET's 57,875 footnotes clearly set it apart from any other translation.

Peter Davids comments that the many footnotes make the NET "a Bible with a limited audience. It will take a serious Bible reader to want to wade through the information presented, whether presented in the text

² Earl Radmacher and Zane C. Hodges, *The NIV Reconsidered: A Fresh Look at a Popular Translation* (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1990), 26-28. See also pp. 29-30.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴ NET, 2347-48.

⁵ It should be noted, however, that the NET does use the word *mankind* frequently. It is used in places where other translations read *men*. Thus it is hard to see why in places like Job 12:10 where most translations have *mankind* the NET puts *human race*. Perhaps this is because this translation has not been done by committee and some translators found even *mankind* to be too gender inclusive.

itself in the various typefaces and frequent footnote numbers or in the footnotes.”⁶

However, Davids suggests that the well trained reader will find fault with many of the notes and will not be attracted to this version: “The person [attracted to the NET] will be a reader who is not put off by Greek characters or references to the manuscript tradition, yet finds the level of explanation in the footnotes useful. The level of explanation will not be enough to interest scholars and many of the more-educated pastors, but it could satisfy many less-educated pastors and relatively sophisticated lay people.”⁷

Davids concludes, “Thus the NET is a translation for a niche market, that group of readers with a serious interest in Bible study and some exposure to Greek (in the NT), but which does not have the education to use the Greek text itself.”⁸

The NASB is the most *wooden* by far, in that it advances as much as possible a word-for-word translation even when it makes for awkward English. This is called *formal equivalence*.

Many people really like this, for the reader knows that he is getting a word-for-word translation. However, others feel the translator should seek to make the English as smooth as—or smoother than (see the comments earlier by the NET translators regarding ambiguity in the original language)—the Hebrew or Greek which it translates, which means at times supplying words, changing word order, changing passive voice into active, and the like.

The KJV and the NKJV are the most *flowing*. Some find them easier to memorize and feel they have a certain cadence to them not found in the others.

Concerning the NT and its underlying Greek text, three of these translations (NIV, NASB, and NET) follow what it is called *the Critical Text*. The other two follow *the Majority Text*. A brief word is in order about these for those readers who are unfamiliar with these terms.

There are a little over 5000 manuscripts of the NT. For any given book, there are between 100 and 1000 manuscripts. *The Critical Text* is a collation of Greek manuscripts that assumes the correct reading, the original reading, is typically the one which is found in the majority of 3

⁶ Davids, “Three Recent Bible Translations,” 532.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

early manuscripts (Aleph, A, and B) which it regards as relatively pure and untainted by scribes. If 2 of these 3 agree, the NASB, NIV, and NET usually call that the correct reading.⁹

The Majority Text essentially suggests that the correct reading is the one which is found in the majority of *all existing manuscripts*, not simply the majority of 3 manuscripts. It does not assume that if two or even all three of these early manuscripts agree that that is necessarily the correct reading.

For example, the NIV, NASB, and NET believe that Mark 16:9-20 is not really part of the Bible since it is not found in two of their most favored manuscripts (Aleph and B). However, since over 900 manuscripts contain these verses, the KJV and the NKJV both believe these verses are original. Interestingly, even though the NIV, NASB, and NET do not normally print words or sentences they feel are not original, here (and in John 7:53–8:11) they print the entire section. The only way you would know they think this isn't part of the Bible is if you notice the brackets before and after the passage and then read their footnote.

Personally I believe in *the Majority Text* position. Thus I believe that John 6:47 includes "in Me" ("he who believes *in Me* has everlasting life") and 1 John 4:19 includes "Him" ("we love *Him* because He first loved us"). Many such examples could be given. While the differences are relatively minor, they are differences nonetheless. So in deciding which version to use, realize you will be looking not only at different translation choices, but the inclusion or exclusion of certain words based on the underlying Greek (or Hebrew) text they use.

Finally, I feel I should briefly comment on the difference between the KJV and the NKJV. Some feel that the KJV of today is the 1611 King James Version. It is not. There were five major revisions, or NKJVs, between 1611 and 1769. Each edition changed the wording of the KJV. The first five revisions were called the Cambridge Revision of 1629, the Cambridge Revision of 1638, the Planned Revision of 1653-

⁹ For example, the NET has the following comment in a note on the text of Rom 8:1, "The earliest and best witnesses of the Alexandrian and Western texts have no additional words for v 1 (Aleph* B D* F G 1506 1739 1881 et pauci [and a few others]," p. 2127, fn. 9. Aleph and B are from the Alexandrian area and are called by the NET translators "[two of the] earliest and best witnesses."

1657, the Cambridge Revision of 1762, and the Oxford Revision of 1769.¹⁰

What we now call the New King James Version is really the 6th revision of the KJV. My good friend, the late Dr. Art Farstad, was the general editor of the revision and he personally explained to me how they took great pains to merely update the language common in 1769 to that of the latter part of the twentieth century.

With this as a brief background, let's compare how each translation handles the selected key passages.

III. FIVE BIBLE TRANSLATIONS IN FOCUS

A. CAN FAITH SAVE HIM? JAMES 2:14

Note how our five translations handle this verse, and pay special attention to the different ways they translate the last part of this verse, the question dealing with the connection between faith and salvation/deliverance.

KJV "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can *faith* save him?"

NKJV "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can *faith* save him?"

NASB "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but has no works? Can *that faith* save him?"

NIV "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can *such faith* save him?"

NET "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can *this kind of faith* save him?"

The NIV, NASB, and NET qualify faith the second time it appears in the verse: "*such faith*," "*that faith*," or "*this kind of faith*," respectively. The KJV and NKJV do not supply the qualifiers.

The Greek merely refers to "the faith" (*hē pistis*). The definite article is also used with *pistis* in the nominative case in vv 16, 17, 20, and 22. Yet in none of these other places do the NIV, NASB, or NET translate the expression as *that faith*, *such faith*, or *this kind of faith*. The translators are making an interpretive decision for the readers here. The

¹⁰ Arthur L. Farstad, *The New King James Version: In the Great Tradition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 24-26.

KJV and NKJV more accurately represent the Greek, with no pejorative description of the faith in question.

In addition, the NIV and NET also seem to be interpreting for the reader when they translate *ean legē tis* (literally “if someone says”) as “if a man *claims*” or “if someone *claims*.” Yet this destroys the verbal tie here with v 12. There the same verb, *legō*, is used and clearly it refers to speaking, not claiming, there. Note even the NIV and NET translations of v 12: “*Speak* and act as those who are going to [or will] be judged by the [or a] law that gives freedom.”

The issue in James 1:21–2:26 is that we are to be doers and not speakers. We find the same thing in 1 John 3:16-18. The issue in v 12 is saying versus doing, not claiming versus doing. Claiming has a pejorative tone. Why wasn’t v 12 translated that way then: “Claim and act as those who are going to be judged...”? The reason is obvious. That isn’t the point in v 12. The NASB is on target as are the KJV and NKJV on this point.

The Free Grace person using the NIV or NET is doubly handicapped on this verse. The NASB user is also handicapped, but not quite as much. The KJV and NKJV are friendly to the Free Grace position in this verse.

This passage serves to illustrate how translators sometimes find it difficult to set aside their theological convictions when translating. If the goal were simply to convey what the original language says as clearly as possible in English, then they would not resort to this sort of interpretive rendering of the text.

B. ANYONE NAMED BROTHER: 1 CORINTHIANS 5:11

The key question here is how the various translations handle the Greek words *tis adelphos onomazomenos*. I have italicized the portion of the translations below that handle those words.

KJV “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, *if any man that is called a brother* be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater...”

NKJV “But now I have written to you not to keep company *with anyone named a brother*, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater...”

NASB “But actually, I wrote to you not to associate *with any so-called brother* if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater...”

NIV “But now I am writing to you that you must not associate *with anyone who calls himself a brother* but is sexually immoral or greedy, or an idolater...”

NET “But now I am writing to you not to associate *with anyone who calls himself a Christian* who is sexually immoral, or greedy, or an idolater...”

In this passage Paul is telling the believers in the church of Corinth that they are to judge those who are inside, not those outside, the church (vv 10, 12). If one takes the view that those inside the church are believers, then Paul is telling the believers in Corinth to separate from immoral or covetous or idolatrous *believers in the church*. If, however, one believes that those inside the church include both believers and unbelievers [or false professors], then Paul is telling the believers in Corinth to separate from immoral or covetous or idolatrous *unbelievers in the church*.

If the job of the translator is to translate and not interpret, the translator should seek to make his translation of this passage as vague as the original. In this case the first two translations, the KJV and NKJV, fill the bill. A Greek participle, *onomazomenos*, has a literal meaning of “anyone bearing the name.” The NKJV gets it just right and the KJV is close. The other three, the NASB, NIV, and NET, all interpret this phrase for the reader rather than translate it.

There is nothing in the Greek that suggests the phrase “so-called brother.” Indeed, the context strongly suggests that this is a genuine believer (compare vv 10 and 12). There is also nothing in the text about what the person *calls himself*. The Greek verb *to call* is not found in this verse. Nor is the word *himself*.

The last three translations reflect an interpretive bias which springs from Reformed theology. If there is no such thing as a believer who is immoral or covetous or an idolater, then Paul isn’t warning about believers here. But note well that even if I was convinced this passage was warning about false professors, I still would translate it “anyone who bears the name brother” or “anyone named brother.”

C. LET HIM BE ACCURSED: GALATIANS 1:8D (AND 1:9D)

KJV “...let him be accursed.”

NKJV “...let him be accursed.”

NASB “...let him be accursed.”

NIV “...let him be eternally condemned!”

NET “...let him be condemned to hell!”

Three translations have “let him be accursed.” This is a literal rendering of the Greek (*anathema estō*). It is ambiguous and could refer to a curse in this life, or in the life to come, or both.

The last two translations, the NIV and NET, are not really translations at all. They are interpretations. The word *condemned* is not found here. Nor are the words *eternally* or *hell*.

The translators have allowed their theology to color their translation. Evidently they believe that there is no such thing as a regenerate person who at some later point actually promotes a false gospel. I would say that there is a lot of evidence in Paul’s writings and even in Galatians (see 2:14!) that some genuine believers fall doctrinally and actually preach false theology and even a false gospel.

Additionally, practically speaking, how would a believer in one of the cities in Galatia let someone be eternally condemned or let them be condemned to hell? Would this mean that they weren’t to witness to them? Or would it mean the opposite—that they were to treat them as someone who is hell bound and thus witness to them?

If we leave the translation as vague as the original, then the practical application is simple: treat these people as those who are cursed. Do not support their ministry financially, prayerfully, or with your time and talents. People who are proclaiming a false gospel, which in Galatians is any gospel other than justification by faith alone (Gal 2:15-16), whether they are Christians who have fallen or unbelievers who never knew the truth, are ones we are not to aid in any way.

D. THERE IS THEREFORE NOW NO CONDEMNATION: ROMANS 8:1

This example deals not so much with differences in how the verse was translated, but in which words were translated. Two of these versions contain an additional phrase at the end of the verse that potentially totally changes the way it is to be understood.

KJV “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”

NKJV “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

NASB “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

NIV “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

NET “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

The reason the KJV and NKJV have a longer reading is because the majority of manuscripts of this verse contain the longer reading.

The NET has a footnote here that is instructive as to why it excluded the longer reading:

The earliest and best witnesses of the Alexandrian and Western texts have no additional words for v 1...Later scribes... added the words...“who do not walk according to the flesh,” while even later ones...added...“but [who do walk] according to the Spirit.” Both the external and internal evidence are completely compelling for the shortest reading. The scribes were obviously motivated to add such qualifications (interpolated from v 4), for otherwise Paul’s gospel was characterized by too much grace. The KJV follows the longest reading found in Byz.¹¹

I’ve always found these types of arguments to be extremely subjective. Might it be that those who adopt the *shorter* reading have misread the text? After all, if the same idea is found in v 4, why is it so antithetical to the context to have it in v 1 as well?

The key word in this verse is the one translated *condemnation* in all five translations. It is the Greek word *katakrima*. According to Moulton and Milligan it means “penal servitude,”¹² that is, slavery to sin. Might not Paul’s point in v 1 be that those who walk according to the Spirit do not experience slavery to sin? After all, this verse is part of Paul’s *sanctification section* in Romans. The verses which follow clearly deal with sanctification and not justification. Paul spent much of chapter 6 showing that believers are no longer slaves to sin and challenging them to no longer live in their experience as slaves to sin. In chapter 7 he shows that a legalistic mindset will not free the believer from sin’s bondage, but will increase it.

The very last verse in Romans 7, the one immediately preceding this one, alludes to slavery to sin! It says, “I thank God—through Jesus Christ

¹¹ NET, 2127, fn. 9.

¹² James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1930, Reprint 1974), 327-28.

our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself *serve* the law of God, *but with the flesh [I serve] the law of sin*" (emphasis added). Does it not make sense that the next verse would build on this idea of serving God or serving sin based on whether we live according to the Spirit or the flesh?

Then in chapter 8 Paul shows how it is the Spirit of God that enables us to live in our experience as we are in our position: as those free from slavery to sin.

Regardless of how you understand Rom 8:1, it is vital that you are looking at what Paul actually wrote. Readers of English translations should realize that the issue is not merely how the translators handled the Hebrew and Greek text, but also *which text* they translated.

E. ABRAHAM'S JUSTIFICATION: GENESIS 15:6

We will now look at one famous OT passage dealing with grace issues to see how these translations handle it.

KJV "And he believed in the LORD; and he *counted it to him for righteousness.*"

NKJV "And he believed in the LORD, and He *accounted it to him for righteousness.*"

NASB "Then he believed in the LORD; and He *reckoned it to him as righteousness.*"

NIV "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

NET "Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD considered his response of faith worthy of a reward."

Here we find four translations in near agreement. The KJV has "counted...for righteousness." The NIV has "credited...as righteousness." The NKJV has "accounted...for righteousness." The NASB has "reckoned...as righteousness."

But why is the NET translation so radically different? The word *righteousness*, found in all four of the other translations, is missing here. Instead we have the word *reward*. Where the others speak of belief as being *counted* or *accounted* or *credited*, the NET has *considered worthy*.

Since this text is quoted twice in the NT by Paul, each time with the Greek representing the idea of being accounted righteous, it seems especially odd to put forth a translation that essentially makes Paul's use of this text illegitimate (see Rom 4:3 and Gal 3:6).

The NET does have four separate notes explaining how it arrived at this translation. The first explains that “believed” refers to “‘consider[ing] something reliable or dependable.’ Abram regarded the God who made this promise as reliable and fully capable of making it a reality.”¹³ This is outstanding.

The second note explains why they changed the third singular pronoun *he* to the LORD. There is certainly no problem with this, though it is really an unnecessary change.¹⁴

The third note says, “*Heb* ‘and he reckoned it to him’...In this case one might translate ‘and he reckoned it to him—[namely] righteousness.’”¹⁵ That is fine. Why then doesn’t the text put it that way?

The fourth note starts, “Or ‘as righteousness.’” Then an extremely odd reference is made:

The verb translated “considered” (*Heb* “reckoned”) also appears with *ṣēdāqāh* (“righteousness”) in Ps 106:31. Alluding to the events recorded in Numbers 25, the psalmist notes that Phinehas’s actions were “credited to him as righteousness for endless generations to come.” Reference is made to the unconditional, eternal covenant with which God rewarded Phinehas’s loyalty (Num 25:12-13). So *ṣēdāqāh* seems to carry by metonymy the meaning “loyal, rewardable behavior” here, a nuance that fits nicely in Genesis 15, where God responds to Abram’s faith by formally ratifying his promise to give Abram and his descendants the land.¹⁶

For a translator to jump from a famous text in Genesis that is often cited in the NT to an obscure text in Psalms that is never cited in the NT is an odd thing to do.

Frankly, I am delighted to find someone in print who takes my view of Ps 106:31. I was convinced it was referring to rewards, but up to this point I really didn’t have a good way of explaining it. Now I do. So in this sense this note in the NET is helpful. But it would have been better if this note and translation had occurred in Ps 106:31 only.

While there are some common words in the two contexts, the differences far outweigh any similarities. Besides, Paul translates and explains

¹³ NET, 57, fn. 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, fn. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, fn. 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, fn. 22.

Gen 15:6 for us and his translation and explanation don't match up with "Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord considered his response of faith worthy of reward."

The translation suggested in the four notes in the NET is fine. But the one actually printed in the text changes *the* key OT text on justification into a text on rewards.

IV. CONCLUSION

We are blessed to have scores of different Bible translations in our language. I have merely picked five of the most popular ones to evaluate today.

While there are differences between these translations, and while I have a preference for the NKJV, I am convinced that a Christian can grow and mature using any of these texts.

Having said that, it is vital for believers to know that you can't rely on every nuance of every word in every translation. Sometimes translators interpret for the reader as we have seen in the cited examples. The NKJV is not perfect. I would prefer a translation that better reflects the Majority Text. But the NKJV does the best job of that. And it does less interpreting and paraphrasing too.

Whatever version you use, I hope you use it! That is the key. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).