

## Translation and Interpretation

When our firstborn started to talk, it seemed as if he began with sentences- not necessarily complete ones, but a lot of words strung together! However, his vocabulary vastly exceeded his enunciation skills. He would rattle off some seemingly endless string of verbiage that sounded like he was speaking in the *unknown tongue*, and the person to whom he was speaking would immediately turn to Donna or I and ask, "What did he say?" We could usually tell them what he said, but would then be asked, "What does that mean?" My standard answer became, "I can translate, but don't ask me to interpret- I can tell you what he said, but I have no idea what he meant!"

There is a subtle but significant difference between "translation" and "interpretation," despite the fact that the words are often used interchangeably. To translate is to merely relay what someone else has said or written, whereas interpretation is an effort to convey what is meant. Additionally, and perhaps obviously, translation typically involves using equivalent terms to relay words from one language to another.

The problem is that in just about any language, words have multiple meanings that may not be necessarily synonymous. For instance, consider the word "wound." Is it a verb meaning to cause hurt or injury? Is it a noun describing the effect produced by hurt or injury? Or, is it a verb indicating that something has been wrapped around a central core or axis? Thus, a mere word for word translation is not always possible without first interpreting the intended meaning, which is usually determined by context. Consider some biblical examples:

- Mark 5:41, "*And taking the child by the hand, He said, 'Talitha kum!' (which translated means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise!')*" Mark seems (from this and other similar passages) to be writing to a primarily Roman readership. Thus, when directly quoting Aramaic terms, he provides an equivalent translation of the words to aid the understanding of his primary audience. Since the words being translated are simple and straightforward, no real interpretation is required.
- Nehemiah 8:8, "*And they read from the book, the law of God, translating (marginal, explaining) to give the sense so that they understood the reading.*" Ezra and the other men with him, cf. v.4, were not only "*translating*" the words of God's law from Hebrew into the Babylonian/Chaldean dialect, they were also *interpreting* it "*to give the sense so that they understood the reading.*"

OK, so what? For *interpretations* to be helpful, the meaning of the original language words utilized must be completely understood before they can be accurately translated. It is not enough to assume that because a word sometimes has a particular meaning in a given context, it means the same thing in every context. Remember "wound"!

From these things, a couple of points follow:

1) When choosing a Bible, be aware that there are *translations* and there are *interpretations*. Though good translators use specific contextual and comparative interpretive clues to accurately "translate" God's word from Hebrew (Old Testament) and Koine/Common Greek (New Testament), interpreters often use their own bias or slant to "translate." Look for a Bible with strong translation principles that dictate its interpretation rather than the other way around. Therefore, avoid Bibles that are published or sponsored by a denomination. They're interpretive biases usually cause them to slant their "translation" to support a doctrine(s) they favor.

2) Always remember 2Peter 1:20-21, "*But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*" We don't get to

“interpret” God’s word however we choose, or to suit our own purposes. Whatever a passage or text says and means, it says and means the same thing for everyone. One “interpretation” may be right and another wrong, or they may both be wrong, but we do not “understand” verses or passages differently, *“for God is a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints,”* 1Corinthians 14:33.

3) The common major translations of the Scriptures are far more accurate than necessary for my admittedly limited knowledge of the original languages, or of English either for that matter. I am just extremely thankful for the dedicated scholarship of those who have worked, and continue to work, to provide us with God’s word in language(s) that we can understand. Among these major common translations, I don’t believe anyone would miss the glories of heaven because he preferred and read one above the other. But you still have to read it, study it, understand it, and obey it for yourself regardless of version. May God grant us all wisdom to that end! (Philip C. Strong;

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