

Bible Translation

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Editorial for the Topical Issue “Bible Translation”

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For the last two millennia, the impact of the Bible on human life has been profound. For hundreds of millions of people, the Bible is a key source of guidance for ethical decisions, religious faith and practice, and the daily habits of life. The Bible is without a doubt the most influential book (actually, “library”) of all time.

Yet the vast majority of people in the world access the Bible not in its original languages, but in a translation. And, as the saying goes, “something was lost in the translation.” Every translation is an interpretation, an attempt to transfer the message of a text in one language into another language. The debate over how best to do this has raged through the centuries. Is it best to reproduce the *form* of the text as close as possible? Or should you pay less attention to form and more to how the text is heard and understood in the receptor language? Should the focus be on the source text and the original meaning for the author’s first audience? Or should greater priority be given to the target audience, making a text clear and understandable (and relevant!) for today? One thing is certain. Translation is much more than a mechanical task; it is both a science and an art.

Complicating these questions of methodology is the reality that the Bible is a *sacred* text, viewed by (most of) its readers as God’s divine revelation to his people. In light of this, the solemn task of preservation and transmission takes on even greater gravity. The first major translation of the Bible was the Septuagint, the rendering of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, beginning in the third century BC. Since then there have been tens of thousands of translations into the vernacular of various people groups around the globe. For these readers, their vernacular Bible is the Word of God.

This topical issue of *Open Theology* is devoted to Bible translation. Research related to Bible translation may be divided into three general (and often overlapping) categories: history, theory, and practice. The present edition includes diverse contributions from all three of these categories. Participants include linguists, missiologists, clergy, Bible translators, and biblical scholars.

At least seven articles deal in various respects with the history of translation, with selections ranging from Greek verb choices in the Septuagint (Gorton), English word selection in the King James Version (Robson), the changing face of the Arabic Bible (Hjälrm), the importance of commentary in Jewish Bible versions (Greenspoon), and an introduction to Hebrew translations of the New Testament (Shuali). There are also articles on sometimes forgotten pioneers of translation, such as early feminist translators (Willett) and Mary Sydney, who showed particular interest in issues of social justice (Willett).

Important articles also discuss the theory of translation. Should the ultimate goal of translation be to reflect the author’s intended meaning (challenged by Frank) or should the particular needs of the target audience be the primary focus, as advocated by *Skopos* theory, also known as functionalism (Nord)? How can the developing field of discourse analysis contribute to Bible translation (Porter)?

Finally, at least seven articles concern practical aspects of translation, though with a constant eye on history and theory. Two of these concern the challenging issue of how to translate poetry, with its emotive and aesthetic features (Wendland; Boerger); another with how to render common Hebrew words into English

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with both accuracy and consistency (Goldingay). Four more deal with controversial issues in translation, including the use of gender-neutral language in English and Polish versions (Gomola), the impact of values and sexism on translation (Reiner), the Common English Bible’s rendering of the traditional “Son of Man” as the “Human One” (Westfall), and the rendering of divine familial terms (i.e., “son of God”) in Islamic contexts (Miller-Naudé & Naudé).

In short, this topical issue offers a veritable smorgasbord of stimulating and insightful articles related to the history, theory and practice of Bible translation. I hope you enjoy it.