

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Introduction

The corporate worship of the faithful is the primary setting for God's means of grace: the Gospel Word, Absolution, Holy Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Because the Word of God is spoken and sung in numerous ways in the context of worship, it is essential that great care be given to the choice of Bible translation.

Not only must a translation of the Psalter be chosen for inclusion in the new hymnal itself, but also a suitable translation must be provided for the many other Scripture passages that appear in the orders of service and in the rites in the Agenda. While it is not mandatory to quote all Scripture passages from the same Bible translation, the selection of one translation facilitates consistency of wording and style in the orders of service and the propers, including the Scripture readings for the day. Such consistency enhances the clarity and integrity of the orders of worship. Conversely, inconsistencies and poor translations of Scripture passages detract from the service and hinder the proclamation of the Gospel and its appropriation in faith by the members of the body of Christ.

Many aspects of the congregation's life radiate from the Divine Service. The materials used in those other aspects may draw on the theology, language, style, and even the Bible translation(s) in the hymnal. In the past in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the Bible translation employed in the hymnal has also been selected for many other publications. Those publications have included lectionaries, Bible studies, Christian day school curricula, and confirmation materials, including Luther's Small Catechism. Therefore the choice of translation for the new hymnal may have a profound impact on numerous aspects of the church's life for many years to come.

The Word of God is the written revelation of Jesus Christ and is the source and norm for the entirety of the Christian faith and life. The Scriptures have the power to make one wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). Therefore, theological precision is of the utmost importance in a translation of Holy Scripture. Inaccurate translations can obscure doctrines that are vital to the Gospel or may cast doubt on the person and work of Jesus Christ and thereby even cause some to forfeit eternal salvation.

For example, in the early church era, Arians argued that Prov. 8:22 should be translated "the Lord *created* me" and that the verse proved that Christ was a created being. The orthodox Christians argued that the verse should be translated "the Lord *begot* me" and that Christ is eternally begotten of the Father. The RSV substituted "young woman" for "virgin" in Is. 7:14, thus calling into question the virgin birth of Christ. The Jehovah's Witnesses have their own Bible translation that renders John 1:1 as "the Word was a god" instead of "the Word was God," a translation they use to deny the deity of Christ.

The CTCR document, "Comparative Study of Bible Translations and Paraphrases" (September 1975), examined various translations of the biblical passages cited in reference to the Second Article of the Creed in *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1943). Those passages deal with the doctrines of the two natures in Christ, the divinity and humanity of Christ, the understanding of Christ as Savior, Christ's conception and birth of the virgin Mary, Christ's work of redemption, and his resurrection. The concluding tabulation in that CTCR document indicates that even the best translations occasionally may not convey the meaning of the text as clearly as they should. Most translations err in at least some key soteriological passages to the extent that their translations fail to communicate a doctrine that is essential for the Gospel. That conclusion underlines the necessity for the church always to have pastors who know the original languages of Scripture, and for church leaders to be judicious in the selection of a translation for use in the church's ministry of worship, teaching, and evangelism.

Today the church may choose from a multiplicity of Bible translations. No translation is perfect in all respects, but many are fine works of scholarship that accurately convey God's Word. An evaluation of translations for inclusion in a hymnal must take into consideration not only their theological faithfulness and clarity, but also their suitability for oral reading and listening, their level and style of English diction, their adaptability for musical settings, and their literary beauty, since all of these factors are relevant for use in worship.

Since the Psalms are so important for worship, a translation should remain faithfully close to established liturgical traditions and not jar the ears of the parishioners with daring alternatives. Some of the psalms already

have a well-established liturgical shape. This is especially true of Psalm 23, whose wording in many people's minds is practically as fixed as that of the Lord's Prayer. Most parishes would prefer, even demand, something very close to the KJV, e.g., "The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want." But in Psalm 23 the church may prefer modernized renditions of some phrases, like "he makes me lie down" instead of "maketh," and "You are with me; Your rod and Your staff" instead of "Thou ... Thy."

There are established liturgical expectations for some other psalms, such as "the King of Glory" in Psalm 24 and the confession of sin in Psalm 51. In addition, there are many short phrases from the psalms that are firmly embedded in the liturgy, e.g., "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever." (NIV most often blandly translates *hesed* as "love," but sometimes in poetry retains "mercy.")

Legitimate concerns about the English rendition of the Psalter for use in the liturgy would include readability, suitability for public and corporate reading, ease of memorization, and conciseness (as opposed to verbosity, which is easy to lapse into when trying to "unpack" terse Hebrew poetry). An ideal translation of the psalms should also be suitable for chanting.

Summary of Translations

Nine versions of the Bible were examined for this comparative study. The following comments are a brief summary of the strengths and weaknesses of each translation. The numbers in parentheses refer the reader to the detailed examples which follow the summaries (available on the CD-ROM).

King James Version (KJV)

New King James Version (NKJV)

First published in 1611, the KJV served for over three centuries as the nearly universal English translation of the Bible. Furthermore, it was very influential in shaping much of the cultural milieu in the United States, not to mention the liturgical and hymnic language of the English-speaking church. It is still eminently elegant and in most places quite accurate. Since it is a form-equivalent translation, it follows the original languages closely (see below under "Language Issues").

The NKJV, published in 1982, was undertaken in order to update the archaic and obsolete language. For example, "thee" and "thou" have been replaced with "you." It is largely successful in retaining the poetic elegance of the KJV. The NKJV affirms the divinity of Christ and many other doctrines that appear to be called into question in the RSV and NRSV.

The main objection to the KJV and NKJV is that for the New Testament they use the Textus Receptus, a Byzantine form of the Greek text that is widely considered by modern scholars to be inferior to older Greek manuscripts (examples 43, 44, 45, 46). In addition, the NKJV follows the meaning of the KJV in some places where recent scholarship argues for a different understanding (examples 2, 16, 20, 41).

Revised Standard Version (RSV)

The RSV, first published in 1952 under the auspices of the National Council of Churches, replaced the KJV in many English-speaking churches. Like the KJV, the RSV is primarily a form-equivalent translation (a translation that follows closely the words and grammatical forms of the original text). The strength of the RSV is that it preserves much of the classic language of the KJV and the beautifully memorable poetry, while updating most of the archaic and obsolete language. However, it retains the archaic language when speaking to God, which is frequent in the Psalms.

The most objectionable feature of the RSV is that it inaccurately renders many passages that refer to the divinity of Christ (examples 22, 29). Furthermore, its rendering of Old Testament prophecies often conflicts with the New Testament fulfillment, e.g., using "created" instead of "begotten" in Prov. 8:22 (see also examples 23, 24, 25, 26, 27). In places, other serious theological problems can be found (examples 18, 30, 32, 35).

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The NRSV, published in 1989 by the National Council of Churches, is an improvement over the RSV in that it updates the archaic language addressed to God (as in the Psalms). However, it perpetuates the worst aspects of the RSV: faulty Christology and inaccurate translations of passages about the fulfillment of prophecy (examples 26, 27, 30). It adds a few new problems that were not present in the RSV, such as changing many masculine singular forms into generic plural forms for the sake of inclusive language (examples 3, 4, 5, 6; see also 28). Its rendering of some verses raises questions about other important doctrinal issues, such as the inerrancy of Scripture (example 35) and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (examples 9, 10, 11, 12).

English Standard Version (ESV)

The ESV is the newest translation, published in September 2001. It is a conservative and evangelical revision of the RSV, and like the RSV and KJV, it is a form-equivalent translation. While it has modernized some archaic features of the RSV, such as the pronouns (“thee” and “thou” are replaced by “you”) in language addressing God, it remains accurate and fairly literal. The ESV retains most of the language of the KJV in well-loved passages such as Psalm 23 (“I shall not want”) and the Lord’s Prayer. The translation of many passages is quite close to the wording familiar to Lutherans in our liturgies, e.g., Psalm 51. The handling of Christology and prophecy-fulfillment generally is excellent and often uses uppercase letters to clarify the meaning (e.g., “King” in Ps. 2:6; “Son” in Ps. 2:7, 12; “my Lord” in Ps. 110:1 versus “my lord” in RSV). The ESV has corrected most of the theological problems evident in the RSV (examples 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32). Its handling of some passages that involve the Sacraments (example 38, also Eph. 5:26) is accurate and superior to the NIV. Because the ESV is so new, it has not yet received as much scrutiny as other translations. (An initial examination has revealed, for example, an infelicity in the translation of Psalm 119 where the Hebrew term *mishpatim* is translated as God’s “rules,” rather than the literal translation of God’s “judgments” in the KJV or RSV’s God’s “ordinances.”) Several LCMS exegetes participated in the review process that shaped the final translation of the ESV.

New International Version (NIV)

The NIV, published in 1978, has much to recommend it. It is the translation that was used in *Lutheran Worship* and *Lutheran Worship Agenda*. Generally, it is an accurate and faithful translation. It is a good translation for Christology, the fulfillment of prophecy, and Christian doctrines such as the inerrancy of Scripture. It represents good, modern English without being trendy or dialectical. However, its rendition of poetry is inferior to the literary beauty of the KJV and its descendants. When read aloud, it does not flow and captivate the hearers’ attention as well as some others. It is a dynamic equivalent translation. Its modern idioms are not as close to the original languages and sometimes lack eloquence (“Adam lay with his wife,” Gen 4:1, instead of the literal and meaningful “Adam knew his wife”). Some of the expressions in the NIV betray a reformed bias, like the use of “Sovereign LORD” (example 12), and in some passages that concern Christology (example 21), the nature of faith (example 13), conversion (example 15), and election (example 19). Allusions to the Sacraments are sometimes translated inaccurately (example 38; also Eph. 5:26, where NIV has “washing with water *through* the word” instead of “washing of water *with* the Word”).

(The Translations Committee has received word that a revision of portions of the NIV featuring inclusive language will soon be released into the American market. A complete revision of the NIV will not be available until 2005.)

New American Standard Bible (NASB)

The NASB was first published in its entirety in 1971. It is a form-equivalent translation that succeeds in being highly accurate (a few exceptions include examples 20, 24, 25, 27, 37). While its precision of translation is very helpful for those who cannot work in the original languages, its literal style is rather wooden, and thus awkward for reading in corporate worship. A revision was published in 1995 which has made some progress in smoothing out the language. The revision also replaced archaic terms like “thee” and “thou.”

An American Translation (AAT)

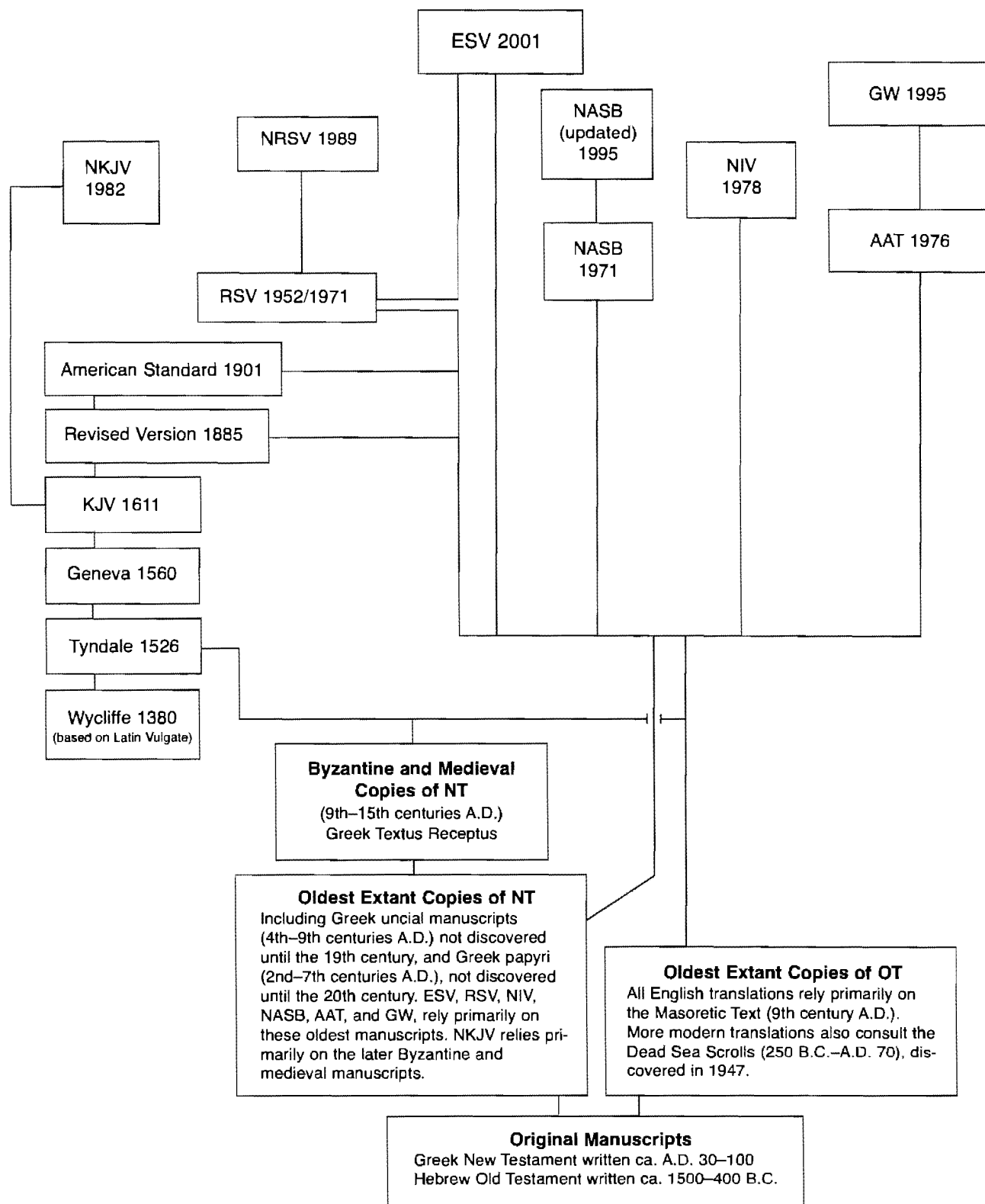
In 1976, the translation of William Beck, professor at Concordia Seminary, was privately published. It was followed by later revisions, most recently the fourth edition in 2000. Intended as a Lutheran translation of the Bible, the AAT aims for a readable style in simple English. Unfortunately, easy readability comes at a price, namely, a casual and colloquial style that may not be elegant enough for public reading. For example, it regularly uses contractions (I'm, can't, etc.). In many respects the AAT is an accurate translation. Sometimes it offers the best rendering (example 16). It is, however, also an idiosyncratic translation, and occasionally offers less accurate renderings (examples 27, 38, 39, 40).

God's Word (GW)

GW was published in 1995 by God's Word to the Nations Bible Society. It was preceded by the publication of the New Testament, *God's Word to the Nations*, in 1988. GW represents a translation style that is the furthest out of the mainstream of those considered in this study. It is certainly readable, which makes it especially useful for private, devotional reading. However, to attain readability at times it sacrifices the accuracy that a literal rendering would have provided. At other times it succeeds very well in its translation choices (example 16). However, it contains problematic renderings, both linguistically (examples 17, 18, 27, 38, 41) and theologically (examples 14, 15, 17, 19, 31, 36, 37, 40). Its decision to translate Greek terms for "justification" and "righteousness" with the expression "God's approval" (example 17) departs from the literal, accurate, and well-established biblical vocabulary for justification, which is central to Lutheran theology. For that reason alone it is difficult to recommend it for use in Lutheran worship settings.

The chart on the following page provides in summary fashion an overview of the history of translations of the Bible into English. Not all translations are represented, and no attempt has been made to indicate various editions of more recent translations. The chart is provided simply to give a general sense of the history of English translations and the primary sources consulted for these translations.

Origins of English Bible Translations



Examples

The bulk of this study consists of a careful analysis of pertinent Bible passages organized under the following categories. The numbers in parentheses indicate the example number. The complete study is available as a PDF file on the accompanying CD-ROM. Go to the “Translations” folder and open the file named “Bible-comparison.”

Language Issues

Formal/Dynamic Equivalence
Archaic/Obsolete Language (1, 2)
Gender Inclusive Language (3, 4, 5, 6)
Paraphrase (7)
Idiosyncratic Translations (8)

Doctrinal Issues

Trinitarian Issues (9, 10, 11, 12)
Name of God
The Nature of Faith (13, 14)
Conversion (15, 16)
Justification (17)
“Adoption” (18)
Election (19)
Christology (20, 21, 22)
Inspiration and Prophecy (23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30)
God’s Involvement in Affliction (31, 32)
Eschatology (33)
Creation (34)
Inerrancy of Scripture (35)
Sacramental Theology (36, 37, 38)

Miscellaneous Texts

Ten Commandments (39)
Aaronic Benediction (40)
Role of Women in the Church (41)

Textual Decisions (42, 43, 44, 45)