

BOOK REVIEW

Andreas J. Köstenberger and David A. Croteau, eds. *Which Bible Translation Should I Use? A Comparison of 4 Major Recent Versions*. Nashville: B&H, 2012. x + 204 pp. Pbk. ISBN 1433676468.

In this volume, editors Köstenberger and Croteau bring together four scholars representing four major recent versions of the Bible. The essays (with the exception of Comfort's on the NLT) have their origins in the Liberty University Biblical Studies Symposium on Bible translation, which took place in the fall of 2011, and were subsequently expanded and refocused to fit this volume. The book's purpose is to help its readers choose the best translation for themselves and to function as a "buyer's guide" (p. 3). Evidently, this is not a scholarly volume meant to engage in the technical aspects of the translation theory debates, but to inform those without such scholarly training.

The book begins with a chapter by the editors, in which they provide a brief history of English language Bible translation. They begin with two short sketches of early Old Testament translations (e.g., LXX and Targumim) and early whole-Bible translations into non-English languages (e.g., the Latin Vulgate, Syriac Peshitta, etc.), followed by English language versions. It is indeed brief, but it helpfully situates the following discussion for the reader, showing the progression from John Wycliffe and William Tyndale to the King James Version and beyond to the present day.

The next four chapters, which comprise the core of the book, each defend one of the major Bible versions under consideration: ESV, NIV, HCSB, NLT. Each essay begins with discussion of the translation philosophy used, followed by discussion of 16 passages of Scripture. This includes a "wildcard" passage chosen

by the author. The required passages are: Exod 2:5–6; Ps 1:1; Ezek 18:5–9, 21–24; Matt 5:1–3; Mark 1:40–45; Mark 16:9–20; Luke 17:3; John 1:3–4, 14, 18; John 2:25–3:1; 1 Cor 2:1, 13; Gal 5:2–6; Col 2:8–15; 1 Thess 1:3; 1 Tim 2:12; Jude 4–5; and Rev 3:20. A variety of objectives are accomplished by choosing these passages. Gender language and gender roles are a key component of several of them, especially of Luke 17:3 and 1 Tim 2:12. Textual variants are another component dealt with through the inclusion of especially Mark 16:9–20. The editors have done a good job in selecting representative passages for various translation issues.

The first essay is from Wayne Grudem, a member of the translation committee that produced the *English Standard Version* (ESV), first published in 2001. The essay begins by highlighting its being a direct descendent of the King James Version. Grudem makes much of this tradition and how it preserves the “best of the best” of the KJV (e.g., in how the ESV maintains it in Ps 1:1), which may have some apologetic value for those who already love the KJV and have grown up with it. More important to the discussion is Grudem’s outlining of the “essentially literal” translation philosophy that the ESV uses. Like many today, Grudem places translations on a spectrum from “woodenly literal” (think of an interlinear) to “highly paraphrastic” (pp. 42–43). He wants to show that the ESV is “in the optimal place on [the] spectrum, where a high degree of literal accuracy is combined with readability and literary excellence” (p. 42). This “essentially literal” philosophy focuses on each word and bringing its meaning into English with normal English word order and syntax. The basis and reason for this word-centered approach is said to be Scripture’s emphasis on the word.

Grudem discusses gender language at length under his analysis of Luke 17:3, where the translation of *adelphos* is at issue. The key issue, he maintains, is not caring about what the translator wants, but whether the translator faithfully shows in English the meaning of an original Greek or Hebrew word, which meant a male person. Grudem’s notion of accuracy here has to do with one-to-one equivalence and he believes “brother,” not “brother and sister,” most accurately reflects the Greek text

(p. 58). Further extensive discussion of gender issues occurs under the analysis of 1 Tim 2:12 where he defends “to have/exercise authority” (neutral/positive connotation) and argues against “to usurp authority” (negative connotation).

When Grudem talks about the ESV’s translation philosophy, he notes that it seeks to translate each word in *its context*. Not only is the notion of context ill-defined in general, it is not defined at all by Grudem. Does “context” mean the context of culture, context of situation, or co-text (as in the surrounding textual expression)? Or does “context” refer to all three of these items? What is the criteria for evaluating context then? Does Grudem account for “context” intuitively? If so, how is it defensible, especially in light of the fact that there are no living native speakers of the languages used in the Bible? Regardless, context appears not to be much of a factor when one reads Grudem’s essay. The defenses he provides of various translations continually reference a literal translation of such and such a word and there is no real discussion of contextual factors that may affect how the translation is made. Several times he talks about the meaning of a word by providing a series of English glosses, but fails to talk about the original language meaning properly in its context. For example, when considering Luke 17:3 (see above) Grudem argues that since *adelphos* meant only a male person (regardless of the plural *adelphoi* being used for both male and female) an English translation should only use what he decides is the nearest English one-word equivalent: “brother.” The universal *applicability* to both males and females is recognized but is not allowed to affect the meaning of *adelphos* here. But contextually speaking, it *does* affect the meaning of *adelphos*. Further, not only is “context” not defined, why the word should be the central carrier of meaning in a text is not linguistically defended. He does mention the issue of verbal inspiration as shown above, but the Bible does not provide a linguistic handbook to understand the role of words with respect to meaning in the textual expression. Inspiration does not necessitate word-centered semantics.

Finally, Grudem gives the impression that he wants to convince the reader that there is only one best way to translate.

In addition to the general polemical tone (found, for example, in statements such as: “If *adelphos* can mean ‘brother or sister,’ then I wonder if someone would please show me one place in the Bible where this *singular* form is used to speak of a female person. I do not think it exists” [p. 61]), the quoted expression above (the ESV is “in the optimal place on [the] spectrum”) leads me to believe this is the case. He appears to never grant that the NLT, for instance, might express something helpful for an English reader that the ESV has not captured. This is not because the ESV is a poor translation but only because one translation cannot do it all.

The second essay is from Douglas Moo, the chair of the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) for the *New International Version* (NIV) 2011 update. He provides two virtues that he believes have made the NIV the “most widely used Bible in the English-speaking world for 30 years, with more than 400 million Bibles in print”: accuracy and readability (p. 79). Moo also uses the literal/paraphrase spectrum and he clusters the ESV, HCSB, NIV, and NLT all near the middle, with the NIV being especially in a “mediating position,” attempting to balance form and function.

Moo spends some time defending the NIV’s approach to gender language before entering the analysis of specific passages. Here he asserts that the NIV was not guided by an agenda, contrary to recent criticism. The CBT’s procedure for handling gender language is given as two-fold: “(1) decide whether the original text was inclusive . . . or exclusive . . . ; (2) decide on the English words that would clearly communicate that meaning” (p. 85). Chief among the decision of how to handle the second part of their procedure was the use of the “Collins Report,” commissioned by the CBT to assess how English speakers and writers are currently using gender language. They found several things, among them that the masculine singular pronoun “he” is “no longer widely used in a generic sense” (p. 87). This helps to explain their gender language translation decisions.

In contrast to Grudem’s essay, Moo’s is more level-headed and fair. For instance, when discussing John 2:25–3:1, Moo

admits that the NIV does lose something with its translation. The NIV translates *anthrōpou*, *anthrōpō*, and *anthrōpos* in this passage as “mankind,” “person,” and “man,” respectively, losing the wordplay, consistency, and connection to Nicodemus that the ESV maintains. But, Moo does not believe the NIV, therefore, got it wrong. He believes that the NIV has gained something too by helping the reader see that a “person” (for *anthrōpō*), regardless of sex, is in view and not simply a male person. This level-headedness correctly exemplifies that translators have decisions to make and no single translation can carry over all the meaning from the source language into the receptor language in one pass. Other examples of Moo’s level-headedness are found in his admission that the differences among the four versions really are slight. The apologetic tone characteristic of Grudem is not found here.

The third essay is from E. Ray Clendenen, defending the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (HCSB). Clendenen sets out the “optimal equivalence” approach of the HCSB in contrast to both formal and functional approaches. Essentially, “[o]ptimal equivalence shares functional equivalence’s commitment to naturalness of language. But it differs from functional equivalence by also treating as desirable the essential characteristics of formal equivalence” (p. 121). Its priority “is communication” (p. 121). The optimal equivalence approach accepts what it considers to be five basic characteristics of formal equivalence, but adds a sixth, seeking not to lose “naturalness of expression” (p. 119). Clendenen helpfully asserts that “‘literal’ does not mean ‘accurate’” and goes on to say, “Striving for accuracy without also striving for ease of comprehension is like shooting at a bull’s eye with an invisible arrow. No one can tell whether you have hit it” (p. 119).

The HCSB’s handling of gender language and roles most closely resembles the ESV as seen in Rev 3:20 and Luke 17:3 with masculine singular pronouns, but also in 1 Tim 2:12 by rendering *authentein* as “to have authority” which is similar, though not exactly the same, to the ESV’s “to exercise authority.”

Apart from matters connected directly to translation theory are the decisions of the HCSB to use “Yahweh” in place of “the

LORD” “whenever God’s name is relevant to the context” (p. 153), and “slave” often for the Hebrew ‘*ebed*, *shipchah*, and ‘*amah*, and almost entirely for the Greek *doulos*. These decisions are concerned with so-called accuracy in translation but are not as directly related to whether one is attempting a more literal or more paraphrastic approach, to use the oft-cited terms. For instance, any of the other three translations could have made the same decisions.

The fourth and final essay is from Philip Comfort, the New Testament coordinating editor and translator for the *New Living Translation* (NLT). As mentioned above, this essay was not originally delivered as part of the symposium that birthed the other three essays. This can be seen in how Comfort has decided to write his essay. He mentions near the beginning that the NLT uses dynamic equivalence (and this is equated for him with functional equivalence or thought-for-thought equivalence). But after taking this as his starting point and assumption, he spends most of his time talking through the textual variants in the manuscripts and how the NLT has handled and translated them. This is certainly a welcome discussion and not surprising given Comfort’s work in textual criticism, but it nonetheless feels out of place with the other essays, which do broach such subjects but do not focus on them. At the same time, the inclusion of an essay on the NLT is a helpful addition to the book since it perhaps offers the most differing approach to the translation of the Bible in contrast to the ESV, NIV, and HCSB, which in reality are not that different.

With respect to gender language, Comfort is forthright with the fact that the NLT uses gender inclusive language in keeping with “the standards of modern English writing.” Not much time is spent on Luke 17:3 and 1 Tim 2:12 (or Rev 3:20) with respect to this issue, but the NLT corresponds with the NIV in its handling of these texts with the difference of the footnote in the NIV for 1 Tim 2:12 giving the option of the relationship of wife to husband. Comfort’s longest discussion of any text is, not surprisingly, the disputed ending of Mark’s Gospel. All four translations agree with setting it off as likely not original though they do this in different ways.

On the whole, it is both interesting and instructive to have four scholars, who have served in some capacity on the translation committees for various English Bible versions, discuss their translation philosophies and particular decisions on various passages. This is a good book to help those Bible readers who do not have a command of Hebrew and Greek to see why the selected 16 (+1) passages differ in these four translations. It may also help a reader understand the complexities of Bible translation and appreciate the hard work of numerous scholars to provide a Bible in their vernacular. The importance of such an endeavor is inestimable. For this reason, I am thankful that all four translations at hand have been providing English speakers around the world with a text of the Bible to read, study, and pray from, and through which to get to know God better. If I could not engage in the original languages myself, I think this book would have helped me decide to buy all four translations and constantly compare.

However, with due recognition of the fact that this book is not meant to be a technical volume debating the intricacies of translation theory, the book does reflect the state of affairs in modern Bible translation theory. It is in this sense that I find the volume lacking. It perpetuates a false dichotomy between literalism and paraphrase that I believe biblical scholarship needs to move beyond. Word-centered notions of meaning still pervade the discussion and even with the ESV's "essentially literal" and the HCSB's "optimal equivalence" approaches, I remain unconvinced that this dichotomy has been surpassed, though Clenenden's essay has some helpful things to say about the pitfalls of literal approaches. At the same time, either one translates the words (in which case a translation is said to be "literal") or one translates the thoughts. What of meaning that occurs in the text beyond the word and is not accountable at the word level? For instance, none of the translation philosophies put forward attempts to deal with capturing thematic structure through a discourse. In fact, even how meaning occurs at the level of the word is ill-defined, necessitating the introduction of an ill-defined notion of "context." The discussions do not show that they are keeping up with modern linguistic advances, let alone the sub-

branch of lexical semantics. This does not mean reverting to Nida's linguistic approach as the way forward, but translators need to recognize that much work has been done, especially in functional linguistics, to inform new ways of thinking about Bible translation, and this needs to be accounted for.

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