



A Study of the Major English and Chinese Bible Versions throughout the History of Bible Translation

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Abstract

This article starts with a concise introduction to the two kinds of translation in the world history of Bible translation and then focuses on a concise introduction to four representative English versions and four Chinese versions.

Keywords: Bible, Translation, Version

“There is a sense in which the work of translation is never wholly finished. This applies to all great literature and uniquely so to the Bible.”(Preface to NIV,1978). The history of Bible translation is divided into four great ages by ‘the vernaculars that were involved’ and ‘the role played by organized religion’ (Orilinsky&Bratcher, 1991:10).

In the last half of the twentieth century, largely connected to the influence of Eugene Nida, Bible translation has experienced a noticeable shift. Whereas the previous versions had sought for a balance between strict literalism and free paraphrase, Nida established his position as a middle ground between what he called formal equivalence, a position that is not the same as literal translation, and free imitation. This new pattern is commonly known as functional equivalence. Traditional translations, in this context, are those that follow the model established by *The King James Version* (KJV). Until the 1950s, formal equivalence was the dominant approach to Bible translation in the English-speaking world. Modern translations break from the type of translation in KJV and follow what is commonly called functional or dynamic equivalence. Nida has set the stage for much of the more idiomatic translation, which has been done in these past several decades.

The following is a brief introduction to the major Bible versions: four traditional translations and four modern translations.

1. Traditional model of English translation

The traditional model of English translation has been dominating Bible translation till the 1960’s. Of the many Bible versions, we select KJV and NASB for illustration due to their far-reaching influence.

1.1 *The King James Version (KJV)*

The King James Version (KJV) which is also called *the Authorized Version(AV)* , has been perhaps more influential than any other single translation in English. The translators held fast to pure, old English speech. With its simple, beautiful, dignified and powerful language, it has been termed, "the noblest monument of English prose" according to the Preface to RSV(*The Revised Standard Version*, 2002). The KJV owes its merit, not to the 17th century English, but to its faithful translation of the original. Also, “As a literary achievement the KJV is unlikely to be superseded by any other as long as the English language is spoken or read, a claim which can hardly be made for any other translation in the literature of the world” (Savory, 1957:107).

1.2 *The New American Standard Bible (NASB)*

As its name implies, *the New American Standard Bible* is a revision of the *American Standard Version(ASV)*(1901). It preserves the highly literal character that has made *the American Standard Version* so useful as a translation for close study. The NASB was widely accepted by conservative churches in the years following its publication, but it was often criticized for its awkward and unnatural English. This was a consequence of the version's strict adherence to the idioms of the original languages, whether or not they were natural in English. Still, the NASB is probably the best literal translation (word-for-word translation) available today, and the publisher continues to advertise it as such.

2. Modern model of English translation

As functional equivalence superseded formal equivalence as the dominant approach to Bible translation in the second half of the 20th century, the golden age of modern model of translation has accordingly arrived. *Today's English Version* (TEV) and *The New International Version* (NIV) are two influential versions guided by functional equivalence.

2.1 *Today's English Version (TEV) or The Good News Bible (GNB)*

Today's English Version of the American Bible Society may be taken as the best example of dynamic equivalence. This is the first major American Bible translation to abandon the Tyndale tradition, and it is popular mainly because it is so easy to read and understand. The aim of this Bible is to give today's readers maximum understanding of the content of the original texts. The Bible Societies trust that people everywhere will not only find increased understanding through the reading and study of this translation, but will also find a saving hope through faith in God, who makes possible this message of Good News for all people.

2.2 *The New International Version (NIV)*

The New International Version was published in 1978, which was more a phrase-for-phrase translation than a word-for-word translation. It is the most popular present day English version translated under the principle of dynamic equivalence. NIV is smooth and easy to read while keeping the integrity and meanings of the original words. NIV has been extremely popular in America, outselling any other translation of the Bible. However, its major flaw is in its simplicity of language. The editors wanted to make sure it was easy to read and they often sacrificed accuracy. The text of NIV has gone through several revisions since it was produced, resulting finally in the 1983 revision.

3. Traditional model of Chinese translation

In China, the traditional model of Bible translation has remained to be the primary one until now. The representative versions are *The Union Version (UV)* and *The Lü Zhenzhong's Version (LV)*.

3.1 *The Union Version (UV)*

It is regarded as the most elegant Chinese Bible from a literary perspective. The Bible translators adopt everyday spoken language instead of classical or vernacular Chinese. They strive to be faithful to the original Hebrew, yet they still take Chinese elegance into consideration. Generally speaking, the translating principle of UV is literally and formally orientated, which can be confirmed by the analysis of the verbal consistency, voice consistency, word class consistency and sentence length.

Ever since the UV was approved as the official version by Christian Protestant churches in the beginning of last century, it has been the most widely distributed and utilized Chinese translation of the Bible.

3.2 *The Lü Zhenzhong's Version (LV)*

The Lü Zhenzhong's Version is a typical literal translation. Lü Zhenzhong uses the so-called "direct translation" method, with exact one-to-one correspondences to the original Hebrew, reflecting the original meaning and content of each word and even keeping to the original grammar and structures. Obviously, he puts much more focus on the literal and structural faithfulness than the idiomatic renderings. He translates all the measurement units according to their pronunciation and keeps most of the figurative expressions. However, the Greek grammatical structures left in the Chinese text result in non-Chinese grammatical renderings and less linguistic elegance.

4. Modern model of Chinese translation

The modern model of Bible translations plays a minor role in Chinese Bible translation compared with the traditional one. The examples are *The Today's Chinese Version (TCV)* and *The Modern Chinese Version (MCV)*.

4.1 *The Today's Chinese Version (TCV)*

The Today's Chinese Version (TCV) was prompted by "the new theory of translating with its focus on communicating the message of the original" (Strandenaes, 1987:139). It took the *Today's English Version* as its blueprint and was accordingly named *The Today's Chinese Version*. The translators used the principle of so-called "dynamic equivalence" during the translation aiming to convey to the Chinese readers what the Hebrew author originally intended to express to the original Hebrew readers or listeners. The translators had in mind average people who had junior middle school education as the majority of the readers and avoided using any theological jargon, which made it more natural and easier-to-follow. Translators intended to prepare a version for seekers and new believers under two main principles—"corresponding meaning and equal effect" and "faithful to the original and faithful to the reader(s)" (Ibid).

4.2 *The Modern Chinese Version (MCV)*

The Modern Chinese Version is the representative of free translation. In its preface (*The Modern Chinese Version*, 1979), it says, "Faithful translation means more than the word matching. The text is supposed to express the same meanings and take the same effect among the target language readers today as the original text among the source language readers thousands of years ago." Here "faithfulness" is defined as the loyalty to the writers' ideas rather than the concordance of styles. The translators intended to give a version intelligible for both believers and nonbelievers with purposely avoidance of theological and Biblical terms and vocabularies.

5. Summary

Roughly speaking, the Bible versions fall into traditional and modern models. In the West, the modern model is now in the upper hand, while in China, the traditional model is still the dominant one. It's hoped that this article could draw more people's attention to Bible translation and facilitate more profound study in this domain.

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