

Dynamic Equivalence Theory, Feminist Ideology and Three Recent Bible Translations



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MODERN English versions of the Scriptures follow one of two philosophies of translation. The first, a traditional formal equivalence or ‘essentially literal’ procedure, translates as closely as possible the original words and phrases with precise equivalents in English. Among modern versions it is probably best represented by the *New King James Version* (NKJV).¹ This formal equivalence translation is verbally more accurate and, as such, it keeps ambiguous in the translation terms and phrases that are ambiguous or undefined in the original, e.g. ‘those of the circumcision’ (Acts 11:2 NKJV) or ‘Put off the old man . . . [and] put on the new man’ (Eph. 4:22, 24 NKJV; cf. Rom. 13:14), and it leaves it to the modern commentator and preacher to define and explain them.

The recently published *English Standard Version* (ESV), although not as verbally precise as the NKJV, also for the most part follows a formal equivalence principle of translation.² An adaptation of the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), it appears to be (on my partial reading) a generally good rendering and an improvement on the RSV.

A second procedure in translation follows the dynamic (or functional) equivalence theory and transforms, if need be, the original into what the translator believes would be an equivalent idiom in the modern language and culture. It is represented by, among others, the *New International Version* (NIV) in which the translator takes on the role of interpreter and commentator. Dynamic equivalence translation is more pleasing and understandable to the modern ear, but it often tends to be more a paraphrase or a targum than a translation of the biblical text. And it downplays the significance and the relevance of the ancient culture and context,

the ‘salvation history,’ for the divine message of the Bible. In the NIV, it also opened the way for a more dramatic departure from a formal equivalence translation, apparent in the 1996 *New International Version. Inclusive Language Edition* (NIVI) or what might be better termed feminist edition, published in Britain, which made its American debut in 2002 as *Today’s New International Version* (TNIV).³

It is clear that feminist ideology, in its rejection of the generic use of ‘man’ and of masculine pronouns, has shaped the TNIV. It is present both in deletions and in alterations of masculine references, sometimes even those referring to Jesus,⁴ that obscure or foreclose both the specific meaning and the range of meaning in the biblical text.⁵ Hundreds of examples could be offered,⁶ but two passages may serve to illustrate such differences between the ESV and the TNIV:

³ *The Holy Bible: New International Version. Inclusive Language Edition* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996); *Today’s New International Version. New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). In traditional standard English, and in the biblical languages, masculine terms are often generic, inclusive of male and female. It is basic to feminist ideology that masculine terms can never be inclusive or generic. Cf. V. C. Phillips, ‘Feminist Interpretation,’ *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, 2 vols., ed. J. H. Hayes (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), I, p. 392.

⁴ E.g. Matt. 11:19; 1 Cor. 15:21; Phil. 2:7(8); cf. John 3:27; 8:17; 16:21; Eph. 2:15.

⁵ E.g. Matt. 19:6, ‘let not man separate’ (ESV), leaves open a corporate (‘mankind’) or an individual (the husband) interpretation. The TNIV’s ‘let no one’ eliminates the corporate and obscures a possible reference to the husband, who in Judaism was normally the only one who could initiate divorce. Cf. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols. in 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–87), II (1979), pp. 485f. On other matters note the TNIV’s paraphrase of οἱ ἄγιοι as ‘believers’ (Acts 9:32; Rom. 15:31; 16:15) and ‘God’s people’ (e.g. Rom. 8:27; 12:13; 16:2; 1 Cor. 6:1; 6:15).

⁶ For the avoidance of the term ‘man’ in the Gospel of Matthew alone cf. Matt. 4:4, 19; 9:8; 10:17, 32f.; 12:12; 13:25; 15:9; 16:23, 26; 19:10, 12, 26; 20:1; 21:25f., 33. Cf. also the paraphrase of ἀνὴρ at Acts 1:16, 25, 22, 29; 3:12; 13:16, 26; 17:5, 22; 19:35; 21:28 and its deletion at Acts

¹ *The Holy Bible. New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway (Good News Publishers), 2001; London: Harper Collins, 2002).

ESV

Mark 2:27:

The Sabbath was made for man ...
So the Son of Man is Lord
Even of the Sabbath.

TNIV

The Sabbath was made for people ...
So the Son of Man is Lord
Even of the Sabbath.

ESV

1 Timothy 2:5:

For there is one God
And there is one mediator
Between God and men
The man Christ Jesus.

TNIV

For there is one God
And one mediator
Between God and human beings
Christ Jesus, himself human.

In Mark 2:27 the *ESV*, by its verbal adherence to the Greek text, retains the corporate, generic and universal sense of ‘man’ and the link between ‘man’ and ‘Son of Man’ that is rooted in rich Old Testament allusions where Hebrew/Aramaic terms for man are used;⁷ the *TNIV* paraphrase loses both. At 1 Timothy 2:5 the *ESV* retains the verbal link between all ‘men’ and the individual ‘man’ Christ Jesus as well as the biblical language relating to the male in creation (Adam) and in redemption (Christ).⁸ The *TNIV*

10:28; 21:38; 23:1, 6, 21. In English the word ‘man’ may refer specifically to the male or to the individual and the corporate human being, male and female, black and white, old and young. There is no other term fully equivalent to it.

⁷ E.g. Dan. 7:13; Ezek. 1:26; Ps. 8:4; Gen. 1:27. Cf. together with the literature cited, E. E. Ellis, ‘Corporate Personality,’ *History and Interpretation in New Testament Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 118–20; idem, ‘The Corporate Son of Man,’ ‘The Conceptual Framework of Luke’s Eschatology,’ ‘The Believer’s Corporate Existence in Christ,’ *Christ and the Future in New Testament History* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 85–88, 112–16, 148–57; idem, ‘Corporate Personality,’ *The Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), pp. 110–16; S. A. Son, *Corporate Elements in Pauline Anthropology* (Roma: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2001), pp. 23–28, 63ff., 75–79, 108–11, 117–20, 163–69.

⁸ Gen. 1:27; 2:7–24; Acts 26:23; Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45ff.; 1 Tim. 2:13; Rev. 1:5. Cf. E. E. Ellis, ‘Paul and the Eschatological Woman,’ *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Lanham, MD: UPA, 1998), pp. 53–86, 60f.

paraphrase, on the other hand, appears to reflect or to leave itself open to a modern unisex ideology in which the distinctive roles of masculine and feminine in biblical thought are minimized or merged.⁹

A number of North American evangelical Christian denominations, notably the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in America, have rejected the *TNIV*, and have recommended that their affiliated churches and agencies neither distribute nor use it. Although many biblical scholars also reject the *TNIV* for its theory of translation, denominational and parachurch leaders have done so primarily, it appears, from an instinctive sense that the *TNIV* and its predecessor *NIV* are translations in the service of a modern ideology.¹⁰ And they do not accept the *apologia* of the *TNIV* translators and publisher that the new version is needed because the standard English of 1960 is no longer understandable or acceptable to English speakers and readers of 2000.

The problem with the *TNIV* is not only its feminist predilection but more significantly its commitment to the theory of ‘dynamic equivalence’ translation. It is to this broader question that the following brief observations are made.¹¹

⁹ Cf. Phillips (note 3), pp. 391f. But see Ellis, ‘Gal. 3:28,’ ‘Hermaphroditism in Gal. 3:28?’ (note 8), 78–85; E. L. Miller, ‘Is Galatians 3:28 the Great Egalitarian Text? *ExpT* 114 (2002–03), pp. 9–11. Otherwise: W. A. Meeks, ‘The Image of the Androgyne,’ *In Search of the Early Christians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 3–54; but see Son (note 7), pp. 168–77.

¹⁰ The same issue is present in the *New Revised Standard Version*. I served for a number of years on the *NRSV* translation committee. On 25 November 1980 the Division of Education and Ministry of the National Council of Churches, who owned the copyright to the *RSV* and who commissioned the translation, approved a number of suggestions ‘to assist [the Committee] in their task of employing a more inclusive language style.’ Over time it became clear that this task was a primary purpose and goal of the translation. Cf. *Time Magazine* 8 Dec. 1980, 128; 29 Dec. 1980, 2. Apart from gender-related texts, however, the *NRSV* is generally a good formal equivalence translation.

¹¹ For a thorough analysis; cf. A. H. Nichols, *Translating the Bible: A Critical Analysis of E. A. Nida’s Theory of Dynamic Equivalence and Its Impact upon Recent Bible Translations* (unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of Sheffield, UK, 1997); abstract: ‘*Translating the Bible*,’ *Tyn Bull* 50.1 (1999), pp. 159f.; R. C. Van Leeuwen, ‘On Bible Translation and Hermeneutics,’ *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*. FS A. C. Thiselton, eds C. Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001), pp. 284–311. Cf. also V. Poythress and W. Grudem, ‘How to Translate,’ *The*

To my mind the ‘dynamic equivalence’ approach to biblical translation has serious deficiencies. (1) It rejects the verbal aspect of biblical inspiration. (2) It gives to the translator the role that rightly belongs to the preacher, commentator and Christian reader. (3) It assumes that the present-day translator knows what contemporary words, idioms and paraphrases are equivalent to the prophets’ and apostles’ wording. (4) It advocates conforming biblical language and concepts to the modern culture rather than conforming the modern culture to biblical language and concepts. (5) It appears to discard the Protestant principle that Christian laity should have full access to the Word of God written without interposition of clergy or of paraphrastic veils. Let us look at these matters in detail.

(1) Verbal inspiration means, among other things, that for the New Testament writers the divine message ‘breathed-out’ (θεόπνευστος) by God through the biblical authors¹² extends to the words that they use.¹³ Although many will disagree, I suggest that the meaning is within the word and that the word employed in the Scriptures is adequate to convey the meaning to the Christian reader as God chooses to do so.¹⁴ It was this concept of the sacred word that caused the translators of the *King James Version* (KJV) and of the *NKJV* to retain meticulously the Hebrew and Greek wording and to place in italics words or idiom that they thought necessary to add for clarity.¹⁵ All of this vanishes in the dynamic equivalence translation theory. On this logic an Eskimo translation could render ‘sheep’ as ‘seal’

since sheep are unknown to the Arctic peoples and ‘seal’ is the nearest Eskimo functional equivalent.

(2) A loss of a sense of the sacred ‘word’ and the recognition that all translation involves some degree of interpretation – word order, syntax, idiom – leads translators who follow this ‘dynamic’ theory to take on the role of commentators. Some suppose that if Christian apostles or prophets could elaborate the biblical text from, e.g. ‘he shall be my son’ (2 Sam. 7:14) to ‘you shall be my sons and daughters’ (2 Cor. 6:18),¹⁶ why cannot they do the same? They are not the first transmitters of the Scriptures to think like this.

Some early and medieval transmitters and translators of the New Testament also thought that they could alter words and phrases of Holy Scripture, and the whole discipline of textual criticism includes the endeavor to weed out such elaborations in a good number of manuscripts. Earlier such translators and transmitters of the biblical text were, however, more concerned to harmonize than to de-masculinize. But since biblical translators, unlike the biblical authors, are neither prophets nor apostles, should they not refrain from doing either? Valerie B. Makkai, past president of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, puts the issue well:

If we are going to call the results a “translation”, then we must *translate* – not rephrase or paraphrase.... [I]t is of utmost importance to me, as a Christian, to know exactly what the Scriptures say ... [I]t is insulting to me as a woman ... to insinuate that I cannot appreciate the differences between ancient and modern cultures, that I am incapable of understanding ... generic *he*, and that I have to be catered to lest I be offended by such a “sexist” usage.¹⁷

Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), pp. 57–90. Somewhat differently, D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998). More broadly, cf. P. J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 145–55.

¹² 2 Tim. 3:16f.; cf. B. B. Warfield, ‘God-Inspired Scripture,’ *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1999 [1948]), pp. 245–96.

¹³ Cf. Matt. 4:4; 5:18; 22:42ff. par; Gal. 3:16; Rev. 22:18f.; Ellis, ‘The Role of the Prophet in the Quest for Truth,’ *Christ* (note 7), pp. 275f.; Warfield (note 12): The New Testament writers regarded Scripture ‘as divinely safeguarded in even its verbal expression’ (115), and they ‘claim verbal inspiration’ (423); Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952 [1871]), I, pp. 164f.

¹⁴ See Ellis, ‘The Word of God Hidden and Revealed,’ *Christ* (note 7), pp. 273–78.

¹⁵ So, F. F. Bruce, *The King James Version: The First 350 Years* (New York: OUP, 1960), p. 15: ‘Words necessary to complete the sense were to be printed in distinctive type.’ This was one of the rules laid down for the original edition. It should be noted, however, that the system of italics in KJV was challenged as early as Alexander Geddes in the late eighteenth century. On his translations cf. F. F. Bruce, ‘The English Bible for Roman Catholics,’ *History of the Bible in English* (New York: OUP, 1978), p. 126.

¹⁶ Cf. E. E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1978), pp. 170f.; idem, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 99f.

¹⁷ ‘Foreword,’ to Poythress (note 11), pp. xxi f. Cf. E. E. Ellis, ‘Perspectives on Biblical Interpretation,’ *JETS* 45 (2002), pp. 473–95, 493f., a review essay of Hayes (note 3).

(3) Modern translators do not always know what is a contemporary equivalent for a biblical word apart from the word itself. One problem is that all of us today, in some respects, have lost what Harry Blamires called ‘a Christian mind’ or what might be better termed ‘a biblical mind’.¹⁸ Western man is sometimes unable to think biblically, especially in two respects, namely, with respect to anthropology and to society. First, with the triumph of nominalist philosophy in this area he tends to think that only the individual is real and that corporate entities – family, nation, man, body of Christ – are only metaphors or ‘collectives.’ For biblical teaching, in my judgment, both the corporate and the individual entities are equally real.¹⁹ Formal equivalent translation leaves open that interpretation; dynamic equivalent paraphrase often precludes it.

Second, the Bible is, socially, a patriarchal book composed in a succession of patriarchal societies. But household relationships are only a small part of biblical teaching on diversity.²⁰ While Scripture represents all of God’s chosen people as equal in value within a diversity of roles, it is also a message in which ‘rank’ is an essential and affirmed component of reality.²¹ It also affirms and transforms the concepts of lordship and servanthood into a positive unity in diversity that is honoring to both estates. Much egalitarian thought in the West, however, rejects such diversities and seeks to eliminate them. This kind of egalitarianism is rooted not in Scripture but, it appears, in the *égalité*, the neo-pagan ideals of the Enlightenment and its aftermath²² that reduce diversity into a bland uniformity and that sometimes

result in a loss of both liberty and equality as seen, for example, in a number of Marxist revolutions. In this respect modern thought stands in stark contrast to the biblical teaching.

If our generation has lost the ability to understand certain biblical terms, the answer is not, I think, to abandon them for paraphrastic ‘educated guesses’ or for politically correct idiom. It is rather to explain the biblical words and idiom. If the translator sticks to transmitting the biblical wording, the preacher and the commentator can then give explanations that may enable our culture, or at least Christian believers in it, to think biblically and thus be prepared to hear the Word of God, i.e. the true meaning within the biblical words.

(4) A fourth issue that is of considerable relevance is the goal of biblical translation. From a New Testament perspective the Bible is the church’s book, and it can be understood only as the Holy Spirit, who inspired the authors, opens the mind and heart of the modern hearer and reader.²³ In large measure its teachings are to be mediated by gifted teachers whom God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit placed in the church²⁴ to expound the Scriptures to Christ’s chosen people and thus to aid them in conforming their lives to its precepts.

With this goal in mind the translators of the *KJV*, who were committed to the sacred character of the

¹⁸ H. Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1978 (1963)).

¹⁹ See above, note 7. Cf. J. Klein, ‘Nominalismus,’ *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 7 vols, eds H. v. Campenhausen et al. (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, ³1965), IV, pp. 1505–8.

²⁰ On New Testament household codes cf. Ellis, *Making* (note 16), pp. 64ff., 110, 134f.

²¹ For the New Testament this is seen with reference to parabolic analogies to the kingdom of God (Luke 12:35–44; 19:12–19), to status in it (Matt. 20:20–23) and in church ministries (Matt. 20:25–28; Luke 22:26f.; Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Cor. 4:1; 9:1–3; 12:28; 16:15f.; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 1:18 with 4:11; 3:1; 5:17; Tit. 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:2). Cf. Ellis, ‘Charism and Order in Earliest Christianity,’ *Making* (note 16), pp. 28ff., 66f.

²² And of the philosophy that underlay it. Cf. S. E. Finer, *The History of Government from Earliest Times*, 3 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1997), I, p. 29: ‘A belief system which envisions the cosmos as arranged in a hierarchy and humans as a part of the

cosmos will accept social inequality as natural. A belief system which *per contra* starts with the unproven and unprovable axiom that “all men are created equal, etc.” will not accept such inequality gladly, if at all,’ Ellis (note 17), p. 494. For the influence also of John Locke on the individualism and (a qualified) egalitarianism in early American thought; cf. D. L. Dungan, ‘John Locke and the Economic Agenda . . .,’ *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 279–83.

²³ Some in the Protestant heritage thought that human reason alone could perceive the Word of God in Scripture; even B. B. Warfield (note 12, 101) appears at times to reflect this viewpoint, i.e. when he speaks of the “Word of God” accessible to man. But the more perceptive writers recognized the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit to make the meaning of Scripture clear to the believing reader. Cf. Ellis, *Christ* (note 7), p. 273n.; idem, *Old Testament* (note 7), pp. 81f.; R. Preus, ‘The Union of the Word and the Spirit,’ *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955), pp. 183–90; H. D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study 1700–1966*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, ²1979), II, pp. 362–69, *passim*.

²⁴ Cf. Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:4–11, 28; Eph. 4:7–12; 1 Pet. 4:10–11; cf. Jas. 3:1.

words of Scripture,²⁵ provided the church with a Bible that transformed the English language to biblical terms and concepts.²⁶ Many biblical terms that were strange to its first readers and hearers became over time, through faithful teaching of the Scriptures, part and parcel of common English.²⁷ The goal and the result of the work of the *KJV* translators was to conform the culture to the Scriptures. In our more secular, i.e. pagan, culture it is even more incumbent upon translators to retain the often strange language of the Bible in order to seek again a similar transformation of our culture. ‘Formal equivalence’ translation accords with this. ‘Functional equivalence’ translations, on the other hand, tend to conform the Scripture to the secularist language and culture and in the process to lose in many respects the meaning of the biblical terms, idioms, and concepts of the prophets of ancient Israel and of apostolic Christianity in which God chose to give his abiding canonical revelation to his people.

(5) It is not too much to say, I think, that the ‘dynamic equivalence’ theory of translating Scripture represents a compromising of the Protestant principle, going back to Wycliffe and Tyndale, that ordinary Christians should have the opportunity to read the Word of God in their own tongue. Medieval clerics hid that Word behind a veil of Latin. Modern ‘dynamic’ translators, not in intention but in result, often veil that Word in a cloud of paraphrase.

Preachers, students and Christian laity may well read with profit many biblical paraphrases as long as they recognize them for what in considerable measure they are, biblical targums or implicit commentaries²⁸ of one or another group of sincere Christian writers. But to best hear the Word of God in English, one should, one would think, listen to or read a version of the Scriptures that adheres most closely to the terms, idioms and concepts of the original Greek and Hebrew texts. As mentioned above, the *NKJV* probably does so most fully, even if in the New Testament

it often follows a manuscript that most contemporary textual critics would regard as secondary.²⁹ The *ESV* also generally meets these criteria. In my judgment, however, the *TNIV* does not.

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²⁹ Notably the longer ending of Mark 16:9–20; John 7:53–58:11 and 1 John 5:7–8. But see W. R. Farmer, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark* (Cambridge: CUP, 1974). The reference edition of the *NKJV* gives in the margin the reading of the most recent critical Greek Testament where it differs from the manuscript followed by the *NKJV*. For a brief history of New Testament textual criticism from Erasmus to Nestle-Aland cf. Dungan (note 22), pp. 291–301. The issue is sometimes exaggerated. The two extreme opposite manuscript families, the ‘Byzantine Imperial text and the Alexandrian Egyptian text ... actually exhibit a remarkable degree of agreement, perhaps as much as 80 percent’ (K. Aland and B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 28); for the other 20 per cent the vast majority of disagreements are misspellings, the repetition or omission of a word or line, or a harmonistic duplication from another New Testament text (cf. Dungan [note 22], pp. 294f.). Furthermore, there is no consensus among textual critics as to which textual family or eclectic combination of manuscripts is closest to the original. Cf. Dungan (note 22), pp. 351–56, and the literature cited; G. D. Kilpatrick, ‘The Greek New Testament Text of Today and the *Textus Receptus*,’ *The Principles and Practices of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Leuven: Peeters, 1990): ‘... at each variation we must look at the readings of the Byzantine manuscripts with the possibility in mind that they may be right’ (49). ‘No readings can be condemned categorically because they are characteristic of certain manuscripts or groups of manuscripts. We have to pursue a consistent eclecticism’ (50).

²⁵ Cf. Bruce (note 15), pp. 23–28.

²⁶ On the influence of the *KJV* on English life and literature; cf. among others, the older work of C. B. McAfee, *The Greatest English Classic* (New York: Harper, 1912). Luther’s Bible did something similar for the German language. Further, cf. N. Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), pp. 5, 207–33.

²⁷ E.g. ‘carnal,’ ‘flesh-pots,’ many terms and concepts in English common law and in English literature.

²⁸ Cf. Ellis, ‘Implicit Midrash,’ *Old Testament* (note 7), pp. 92–96.