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# KNOWING WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY MEANS

WHY MULTIPLE  
TRANSLATIONS MIGHT  
EVEN BE BETTER THAN  
SCRIPTURE IN ITS  
ORIGINAL LANGUAGES.

By Jost Zetsche

**F**ROM COUNTLESS PULPITS every week we hear an implicit message that has wormed its way into our minds: We lack the key to unlocking the secrets of Scripture because we don't know the original languages.

Sure, we have translations of the Bible—a lot of them, in fact. But pastors tell us again and again that, unlike the term in the Bibles in our laps, the *true* meaning of any given term in the Old or New Testament is something quite different. It's a bit like pre-Reformation times, when illiterate believers had to depend on church authorities to tell them what the Bible said and meant.

A little overdrawn? Perhaps. But many Christians assume that they could glean a deeper and more profound meaning from Scripture if only they knew the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic.

As a working translator, I have studied translation for years. And though I would agree that knowing the original languages is key for any other text, when it comes to the Bible, I don't. In fact, I believe that translations of Scripture are not secondary fill-ins. Rather, they are integral to the ongoing and primary expression of God's message to us.

## WORDS AND THEIR WILES

We all know that words are powerful. The words spoken to us in anger as children can haunt us, and the tender words of those who love us can provide remarkable comfort for years. But we may not realize how fickle words can be. They are fickle because language, at its root, represents a perception of reality—*our* perception, which isn't necessarily shared by anyone else.

Words reflect what we believe or make believe. There is no guarantee anyone will ever completely understand our words—and we know from experience how easily they are misunderstood. Our immediate listeners typically understand because they share our context, but otherwise, words and their meaning can

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be slippery and difficult to pin down.

That’s all the more true for words that describe someone as mysterious as God. When Moses asked God to tell him his name, to reveal his identity, God told Moses what he needed to know: *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (Ex. 3:14). But as it turns out, this divine revelation in human language is insufficient, as the translation by Jewish translator Robert Alter illustrates. Alter notes that “rivers of ink have since flowed in theological reflection on and philosophical analysis of this name,” which could also be translated as the more familiar “I Am That I Am,” “I Am He Who Endures,” and many other possibilities.

Of course, God knew that a name was inadequate to reveal his full nature, so he used a long historical narrative full of poetry, instruction, and visions in order to communicate who he is in relation to us. By studying this comprehensive work, the Bible, we find out about—indeed, *find*—God.

But language is not merely a medium to convey information about the story of the Bible. Language itself is a crucial part of the narrative, something core to the Bible’s very nature.

**THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE**

In the beginning, language set divine creation in motion (“God said, ‘Let there be . . .’” in Genesis 1). And in the end, Revelation 7:9 tells us, worshippers will stand before God “from every nation, tribe, people, and *language*” [my emphases]. According to the Bible, therefore, language is centrally important in God’s dealing with us, and ours with him.

Between Genesis and Revelation lies the birth of the church, an event that in the biblical narrative is also marked by language—namely, language translation. According to Acts, as soon as the apostles were filled with the Spirit, they started to speak in languages that were immediately understood by the many bystanders, who represented “every nation under heaven” (2:5). This supernatural translation event marked the beginning of the great and ongoing mission project at whose very core lies Scripture translation.

These two short paragraphs hardly do justice to the uses of language in God’s purposes for us. The larger point is that he has spoken to people at special moments in history and employed written language in Scripture to communicate with us.

**EQUALLY RELEVANT TO GOD**

When Paul proclaims in Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile,” he states one of the strongest tenets of our faith: There is no difference in the value of a person based on origin. In the same manner, there is no difference in the value of particular languages and how they express the Word of God. Yale historian Lamin Sanneh, who has written extensively about the translation of the Christian message, notes, “God, who has no linguistic favorites, has determined that we should all hear the Good News ‘in our native tongue.’”

Andrew Walls, a leading British missiologist, maintains that the translation of the Word is a reflection of the very nature of

Christianity. In fact, he points out that Jesus’ incarnation as described in John 1:14—“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”—is the very first act of translation. This divine act of translation gives us ultimate confidence in the further successful translatability of the Bible. As Walls says, “There is a history of translation of the Bible because there was a translation of the Word into flesh.”

And of course, the God who became human, who was *translated* into humanity, also used language—not just signs or miracles or mystical visions—to communicate divine truth to us.

Any expression in any one language has a range of meaning, something that linguists call a *semantic field*. In the case of “I Will Be What I Will Be,” a variety of expressions in English—and in any language—can be used to convey single aspects of the field. But none matches the full range of meanings. Add to that the constantly changing nature of language and corresponding



changes in meaning, the opinions and allegiances of translators to certain theologies and doctrines, and the ongoing research that casts new light on the source text, and you end up with a lot more than one translated version of the Bible for each language, especially in cultures with vibrant faith communities.

In English alone, we’ve had more than a dozen new mainstream translations in the past 20 years alone. But instead of this confusing the meaning of Scripture, it actually gives English-speaking Christians a rich, multilayered resource for gaining fresh insights on the Word of God.

But what about translations in other languages—what difference do they make to English speakers?

**THE ULTIMATE CHOIR**

It’s important to remember how the Revelation passage concludes. Here’s how the Voice translators relay the scene:

I looked and saw a huge crowd of people, which no one could *even begin* to count, representing every nation and tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and waving palm branches. *They cried out with one loud*

voice [emphasis mine]: “Salvation comes only from our God, who sits upon the throne, and from the Lamb.”

Based on the number of languages today, there will be more than 6,000 languages represented in that one loud voice. The sound of unimaginable harmonic complexity will be the most complete human expression ever to represent Christ—perhaps the perfect reflection of the Lamb, whom the crowd worships. It will certainly be language’s crowning achievement.

It’s an amazing sight and sound to anticipate. In the meantime, until we join the polyglot choir, what relevance does it have to us today? We may have a vague idea that translators are laboring in obscurity around the world to translate the Bible into 6,500-some languages. But what difference does it actually make to us that translators are working in languages that we don’t understand?

***I believe that translations of Scripture are not secondary fill-ins but an integral part of the ongoing and primary expression of God’s message in written form.***

It’s this: Every new rendering of God’s Word in a linguistic set of human expression—a language—enriches the worldwide church in her understanding of God, regardless of whether we speak that particular language. Our thinking and imagination are necessarily confined and constrained by our own language and its assumptions. But when we encounter another language—and as it confronts and interacts with the biblical text—it can expand our understanding of God and our world. This is true in our dealings with the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic source texts, yes, but also the more than 2,000 target languages into which the Bible or parts of the Bible have been translated.

Take this example from a number of Chinese Bible translations. We know that God transcends gender, but most languages are limited to grammatical gender expressed in pronouns. In the case of English, this is confined to *he*, *she*, and *it*. Modern Chinese, however, offers another possibility. In modern Chinese, the third-person singular pronoun is always pronounced the same (*tā*), but it is written differently according to its gender (他 is *he*, 她是 *she*, and 它/牠 is *it*). In each of these characters, the first (or upper) part defines the gender (man, woman, or thing/animal), while the second element

gives the clue to its pronunciation.

In 1930, after a full century with dozens of Chinese translations, Bible translator Wang Yuande coined a new “godly” pronoun: 祂. Chinese readers immediately knew how to pronounce it: *tā*. But they also recognized that the first part of that character, signifying something spiritual, clarified that God has no gender aside from being God. This translation discovery was an aha moment for Chinese believers. But knowing this benefits us as well—even if we don’t understand Chinese—because it expands our comprehension of God’s divine character.

There is no automation in this process. Translation is not a magical act where a unique facet of God is unearthed each time a new translation is published or a language is “conquered.” But as each faith community matures, discoveries like the Chinese divine pronoun can add to our understanding of God. In the case of the Chinese pronoun, it took a maturation process of 100 years and a member of the native church to reach this revelation.

According to linguist David Crystal, the ongoing death of languages (judged by the death of the last speaker of that language) will occur at the rate of about one every two weeks over the next century. The *Ethnologue*, a language inventory published by SIL International, lists 473 near-extinct languages, those with “only a few elderly speakers . . . still living.” This represents nearly 500 fewer languages in that grand choir and 500 fewer opportunities for all of us to understand aspects of God that only those languages may have offered.

Future translations of the Bible into languages with existing translations and into those many languages without the Bible will not add anything to the original words of the Bible. But each of these translations has the potential to mature and increase our understanding of those words and, ultimately, our comprehension of God. Naturally, the primary beneficiaries are the people into whose language the Bible is translated. But as other language groups hear about the structure and thinking behind the new translation—e.g., the new Chinese translation—their knowledge of God’s Word also deepens.

There certainly are advantages to being able to read the source texts of the Bible—just reading the many testimonies of Bible translators who have discovered a deeper and often more personal understanding of Scripture by working through the original languages speaks volumes. But just as access to many different translations in one language deepens our understanding of God, grasping how Chinese, Tagalog, Arabic, and Swahili versions of the Bible are translated can provide insights into the nature of God that might be found only in those translations.

Here’s my dream as a faithful translator sitting in the pew: The next time my pastor expounds on the broader meaning of a biblical term, that foreign-sounding word he draws from may well be Quechua or Navajo or Korean or any of the more than 2,000 other possibilities, thus drawing me and my fellow worshipers into the ongoing translation process of God’s Word. ☩

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