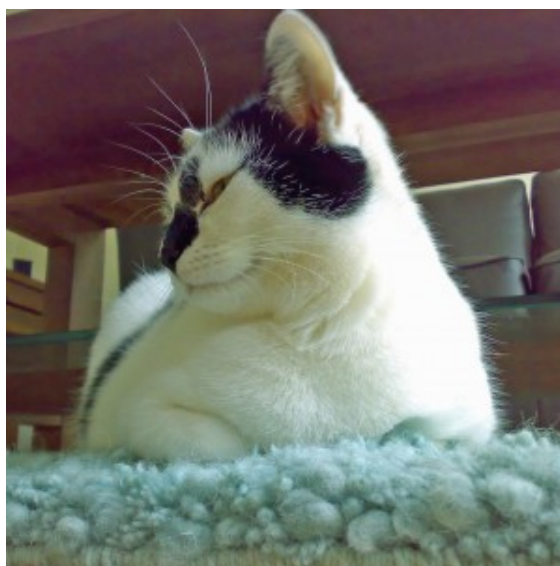


Part 4: Christians love translations: Reading a foreign text

They call Jews, Christians and Muslims “people of the book”. For Muslims the Holy Qur’an is perfect in its original Arabic, therefore translations are suspect. By contrast, Christians have actively encouraged Bible translation. Evangelising a new people, translating at least a gospel is a high priority. We aim to people Scripture in their own languages.

See also the box **Does God save women?**



The Cat Sat on the Mat by Xerones

No translation is perfect

Christians love translations, but no translation is perfect. Rendering even the simplest sentence between closely related languages poses problems. Try putting: “The cat sat on the mat” into French. Is the cat male or female? (French has “le chat” and “la chatte”.) Does “sat” mean: “is in the act of sitting”, “used habitually to sit”, “was sitting at some

previous time"... (French has multiple possible renderings of "sat" here. Without more information, the translator's job is impossible! Context usually answers many of these questions, but not all. No translation is perfect, all add to and/or take away meaning as they move between languages.

If you have argued with a Jehovah's Witness about Jesus, you will know their Bible renders John 1:1 "the Word was a god" not "the word was God". Explaining our translation to them is difficult, because the Greek reads theos | was | the | word ("theos" is the Greek word for "a god" or for "God"). The issue is not the words, but how the Greek language works or how the New Testament writers thought. Translation is a specialised job, and new languages can't be learned fast.

Not mix and match, but compare and contrast

Because no translation is perfect we have the possibility of a range of translations in almost any verse of Scripture. There are three ways we can respond to this variety (apart from spending years learning Hebrew and Greek).

- **Pick one translation** and stick with it, but this means pretending that only "our" translators got it right.
- **Mix and match**, read a few translations and pick the rendering that appeals to us, but this puts us in charge and Scripture at our service.
- **Compare and contrast** is hard work, but keeps us reading the Bible faithfully. Read more than one translation, note the differences. (Not minor ones, but those that change the meaning.) Then explain them. Sometimes footnotes in a Bible will help. Sometimes you may need to consult a "commentary".

Choosing between different translation possibilities is highly technical. However, if our understanding of the passage might

be compromised by such a difference, we should be cautious. The important things in Scripture are said, clearly and often. God has not left us at the whim of textual variants or translation difficulties. So, if the point you wanted to make is made difficult by one translation don't simply chose another, but check that you have really got the message right! At least make sure that the message is found in several other Bible passages. That way, what you say is a message from the Bible, not just your own idea!

Choosing the “best” translation

There is no one “best” translation, all are imperfect. However, some translations are better for particular tasks:

- **Public reading:** needs clear simple English. You may love the *New International Version*, but can the youngest, or least educated, person in the group understand it easily? Perhaps choose instead a translation that aims for simplicity, like the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV was designed for reading aloud) or the *New Living Translation*. As a compromise, *Today's New International Version* could work.
- **Private study:** has two different needs:
 - For a **quick overview** of a passage, choose something “easy” to understand (CEV or NLT are great for this).
 - Spotting the detail of **how the passage works** (see next month's article, and September's) is best done with a fairly “literal” translation (one that stays close to word for word) then we can spot repetitions, contrasts, how word pictures are used etc. Here the *New Revised Standard Version* or NIV are really helpful.

Homework

Read Romans 7:14-25 in Bibles of both word for word sort (e.g. NRSV, NASB or NIV) and in simpler English (e.g. CEV or NLT). Note down where the simpler one explains something. If you had only read the word for word translation would the meaning have been clear?

Look at 1 Kings 11:21 in several translations, more word for word translations use phrases like “rested with his ancestors”. What do these phrases mean in English? How do simpler translations render it? Why do you think there is this difference?

Look at Proverbs 18:24 in several translations. Can you explain the differences? Do they significantly alter the meaning of the proverb?

Discuss this [HERE](#).

Does God save women?

One significant difference between translations in recent years concerns “sexist language”. In the past, in English, “man” was commonly used in an inclusive sense that implied both men and women. This is no longer common usage. In other ways too such “sexist language” might now be understood to exclude women. Several Bible translations try to avoid misunderstandings by being “inclusive”.

The NIV does not always use inclusive language, so in John 1:2 it reads: “In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” Does this mean Jesus does not enlighten women!? It is worth thinking about whether the translation you use in public

is inclusive, or seems to exclude women from God's promises and warnings!