



Bible Translation and Performance for the Parish: The Enduring Beauty of the King James Version

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Something spectacular is being celebrated in 2011: the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible (KJV). I will leave it to others to tell the intriguing story of this enterprise that has shaped the dialects and cultures of English around the world,¹ but I am delighted by the resulting heightened interest in Bible translation, an activity that has been central to my own life this past quarter century.

The history of the KJV is only one chapter in an illustrious narrative of the history of Bible translation, lasting more than two millennia.² Although all religions are involved in some type of translation, Christianity does not just use translation

¹See David G. Burke, ed., *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, 2009). See also David Burke's essay in this issue, "The Enduring Significance of the King James Version," *Word & World* 31/3 (2011) 229–244.

²See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

“Beauty” was a guiding principle of the translators of the King James Version, and it has remained a goal of many translators over the past four hundred years. A text’s beauty is best experienced, however, when a text is heard, not when it is read silently. “Performing” the biblical texts orally is a way to convey both the beauty and the meaning of the Bible to contemporary hearers.

occasionally but has made it an inherent part of the faith. Missiologist Andrew Walls describes Christianity as “infinitely translatable.”³ Biblical theology is replete with insightful paradigms related to translation. Whether one looks to the creation story and the Tower of Babel, the reading of the book of the law in Nehemiah “with interpretation” (Neh 8:8), the richness of the incarnation, the flames of Pentecost, or the eschatological vision of the diversity of ethnic representation, the biblical narrative articulates theologies of language and translation throughout its pages. A less positive assessment of Bible translation emerges in the modern missionary era, where scholars assert that Bible translation has often accompanied colonial agendas.⁴ Each of these directions is a viable topic for a study of Bible translation. However, in the following pages, I provide a brief overview of the performative nature of the Bible along with some reflections on contemporary performances of translations in the parish.

COMMUNICATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ANTIQUITY

In the first century of the Common Era, the predominant means of communication of biblical material was not through silent, individual reading. Even public communication of biblical materials was not confined to a printed page. Of course, writing existed and was used by elites for their purposes.⁵ However, the majority of people in the first-century Mediterranean world were not functionally literate. People accessed important information by the ear.⁶ The rhetorical environment of the day—even as distant as ancient Palestine was from the educational centers—shaped how messages were communicated. Whole schools were developed to pass on formal training, through written and spoken means, in the art of rhetoric.⁷

The New Testament genres—for example, narrative, epistolary, and apocalyptic—use different strategies of communication, but we can be fairly confident that the spoken word was primary to the composition and transmission of the entire New Testament. I suggest that we need to consciously imagine a completely different setting for the reception of the New Testament than a silent, individualistic reading. The New Testament was intended to be heard!⁸ And its reception was intended to be communal. Throughout the Greek manuscripts there are indica-

³Andrew F. Walls, “The Translation Principle in Christian History,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996) 22.

⁴Randall C. Bailey and Tina Phippen, eds., “Race, Class, and the Politics of Biblical Translation,” *Semeia* 76 (1996).

⁵For a helpful window into this manuscript world, see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁶The predominance of auditory reception does not negate the (nonliterary) visual means by which people were also informed; architecture, coinage, statuary, and other visual communication systems did not require literacy.

⁷The quantity of material on this subject is significant. I suggest that the interested reader access the bibliography found at www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org (accessed April 21, 2011).

⁸A recent work that demonstrates the sound strategy of the New Testament is Margaret E. Lee and Brandon B. Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament* (Salem: Polebridge, 2009).

tions of word and sound plays. Written scrolls and codices of the early church Scriptures do not generally show evidence of formatting—word spacing or even punctuation. In time, as the presentation methods evolved, such notations and formatting technologies increased. This was not, however, an abandonment of performance but a method to provide performance markers in a text. After all, punctuation has to do with silence, intonation, and the speed at which something is delivered. In other words, the written forms were a memory aid for performance.

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The term “performance” might distract some readers. My intention in using the term is not to suggest some type of entertainment. As I’ve written elsewhere, “Dramatic interpretation is what is meant. . . . Performance is understood throughout. . . . as a sincere embodiment of communication.”⁹ The terms “presentation” or “proclamation” connote more of a unilateral communication process. “Performance” expects there to be an interaction and mutual influence between audience and performer(s). The term underscores the importance of audience and the communal experience. Finally, performance promotes the agency of audiences who, along with performers, negotiate the meaning of what is performed.

THE BEAUTY OF THE KJV

One of the consistent comments about the KJV is the beauty of the expressions. How is it that we experience this beauty? I suggest that most often this comes by reading the texts aloud. Just as poetry is intended to be read aloud, so too the KJV’s beauty is best appreciated with the ear. Take for example, Matt 7:27: “. . . and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.”¹⁰ Now read this aloud. Do you hear the punctuation, the pauses? The pauses participate in the cadence of the voice. Try reading it again:

and the rain descended,
and the floods came,
and the winds blew,
and beat upon that house;
and it fell:
and great was the fall of it.

⁹James A. Maxey, *From Orality to Orality: A New Paradigm for Contextual Translation of the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009) 2.

¹⁰David Norton used this example in his paper, “The KJV at 400: Assessing Its Genius as Bible Translation and Its Literary Influence” (Society of Biblical Literature meeting, Atlanta, 2010).

Somehow, the committee of translators four hundred years ago was able to capture the beauty of the English language in their translation, which was, in fact, one of their guiding principles (one that has continued with other translation committees). This beauty becomes most evident when it is heard. All English translations stand on the shoulders of the KJV—if not textually then certainly culturally. All translators of the Bible into English (and many other languages) live in the shadow of this KJV translation.

EXPERIENCING THE BIBLE IN PERFORMANCE

In 2003, having returned from Cameroon where I had been involved in Bible translation for the previous twelve years, I found myself in a classroom at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago with David Rhoads, who was teaching how to use narrative criticism as a method to analyze the Gospel of Luke.¹¹ Partway through the course, Professor Rhoads asked us to set aside our books. Standing in our midst, he performed for about fifteen to twenty minutes passages in Luke connected by the theme of poverty. I was mesmerized. The content was compelling, but something had taken place that went beyond the words themselves. Beyond the Greek parsing, beyond the commentaries' debates of the date, author, and audience of the Gospel of Luke, beyond the theological discussions of the messages over the past two millennia, something fresh and experiential happened. Wanting to understand this better, I began to explore what has become known as biblical performance criticism¹² and the communication setting for the early reception of the New Testament. Using the analogy of music seems to help in explaining this. It seemed like for so long (in my reading of the Bible) I had simply been reading the musical notes on a page. I was studying about the music's composition. I was researching about the contexts in which the music had been composed. But I was not experiencing the music. And we all know that music changes us.

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Several years ago, I was asked by my home congregation to participate in worship with them by performing part of Mark's Gospel. At the regular worship hours we truncated some of the liturgy so that I could perform the first half of Mark's story, which takes about an hour. I had memorized a revised translation by

¹¹See David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark As Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

¹²A monograph series with Wipf & Stock continues to produce new titles: Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009); Maxey, *From Orality to Orality*; Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

Professor Rhoads. The Gospel tells a captivating story when not cut up into bite-sized morsels. One hears the rhythm of spiraling themes that don't entirely repeat, but overlap with the expansion of ideas or illustrations. And the larger story is made up of smaller stories that have lexical liaisons to the ear that connect things that might be separated by several minutes within the story. As I trumpeted Mark's opening lines, people recognized certain phrases but didn't see a paper or book. I did not ask them to follow along in their bulletin; I asked instead for their eyes and their ears. In such a performance, every once in a while, we forget where we are and we imagine a line said directly to us. Or we turn to see an old friend in the gathering and hear a message that motivates us to call them up later that day. Biblical performance is not about some self-aggrandizing pastor-performer. It's about coming together and experiencing the Bible beyond the printed page.

BIBLE PERFORMANCE IN CAMEROON

While completing research on my dissertation, I travelled back to Cameroon to spend several weeks with the community where I had worked as a linguist and exegete. I worked with the translators—Jean and Alfred—who had translated the New Testament into their language of Vuté.¹³ On this trip, I talked to them about biblical performance criticism, and I made some comparisons with the storytelling that continues to be an integral part of the Vuté community. I asked a simple question that sent us on a long journey: If you were translating the New Testament for performance, would you translate differently? Based on this, Jean and Alfred drafted some new translations of five passages from Mark's Gospel, which they then shared with some of the storyteller-performers from their community.

Over the next couple of weeks, we scheduled a variety of venues for these storytellers to perform these gospel stories. Some were traditional church settings, both Lutheran and Catholic. Some were in the houses of friends; others were in isolated hamlets. Some told the stories; some involved others in group performances. Some wrote songs that told the story and invited the audience to join in with a refrain. Sometimes, these performances occurred during the day; others were at night, around a fire. I recorded these performances and I compared the transcripts with the performance-oriented translations of Jean and Alfred and the published New Testament text of these passages. The differences were revealing. There was a progression of fluidity from the more lexically fixed published version to the performances. The most amazing part was how the performances underscored communal participation. Audiences were active participants, and performers interacted with the audiences.

Some important questions arise in relation to this research with regard to what exactly these performances were. That is, are we to consider the performances

¹³The Vuté New Testament project was ecumenical, with Jean Nogoadjéré representing the Roman Catholic community and Alfred Oumarou the Lutheran community. Numerous reviewers from throughout the region participated in this experience that continues today as the Old Testament lectionary passages are translated.

in those Vuté communities the Bible? This is obviously an important question, requiring serious consideration. But I think it would be helpful to turn the question around: What do we mean by “Bible”? Are we talking about a book? Are we talking about a source of authority? Are we talking about the “meaning” of biblical texts and where such meaning is located? Churches need to continue to pursue all such questions.¹⁴

BIBLE FLUENCY AND PERFORMANCE IN THE PARISH

It is not uncommon today to hear laments about our “biblical illiteracy.” More recent discussions have changed the metaphor to “Bible fluency.”¹⁵ “Fluency” seems more organic and less determinative of one particular medium for the Bible. Having spent much of my adult life outside of English-speaking communities—whether on a small island in the Philippines or living in the bustling European capital of Brussels or raising a family in rural Africa—I was always challenged to “become fluent” in another language. I have discovered that one of the keys to doing this is to put away the books. I’m not suggesting that grammar rules are unimportant, but the ideal way to learn another language effectively and to develop vocabulary and pronunciation is to use it. Part of using a language is to become exposed to its native speakers. The metaphor of “fluency” suggests that we immerse ourselves in the Bible. The grammar is important, but it might be more important to immerse ourselves in the stories, letters, and other genres of the Bible. Performance of the Bible can be a strategic means of immersion. Few people want to hear grammar rules read to them. But stories bring us in, and together.

“Look into the eyes of the people to whom you are speaking”

One version of the lectionary texts for worship (NRSV) includes indications of how to pronounce some words and provides hints regarding the tone of the reading (somber, prophetic, joyful, and so on). The format of the lines (by cola) provides the reader with an idea of where to take a breath.¹⁶ All of these are very helpful extratextual aids. Not included though is this advice: “Look into the eyes of the people to whom you are speaking.” I think there is something particularly important about eye contact. Other facial features support the eyes, as do hand gestures, body posture, and the proximity of the speaker to the audience. The challenge, of course, becomes how to read the text and at the same time attract the attention of

¹⁴Potential references for this subject are vast. Two helpful entries to the subject are Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), and Charles H. Cosgrove, ed., *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy, and the Conflict of Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004).

¹⁵Following the 2007 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Churchwide assembly, the Book of Faith initiative was created, “with the goal of raising to a new level this church’s individual and collective engagement with the Bible and its teaching, yielding greater biblical fluency and a more profound appreciation of Lutheran principles and approaches for the use of Scripture.” See www.bookoffaith.org/bof_new/about.htm (accessed April 22, 2011).

¹⁶*Lectionary for Worship: Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006 [Year C], 2007 [Year A], 2008 [Year B]).

the audience by capturing their glance. Whereas certain lecturers can seemingly read from a page and still look out at the audience, most of us have to choose between one or the other: the page or the people. This is where memory comes in. If someone is to present the biblical passage to people without having their eyes on the page, they are going to have to spend time memorizing the text.

There is a movement today to train people in congregations for the performance of biblical passages during worship. It's not possible to go into all the pedagogy of such an approach here, but the possibilities are promising.

The presentation of scripture is a place where the gathered community encounters the Word of God in worship. It is the presentation of the words of ancient people witnessing to extraordinary things that God has done—and how humans have struggled to respond to God's activity. Through these human words, we encounter God's Word. The lector does not pretend to be the voice of God. The lector is sharing the words of witnesses who have gone before us attesting to the presence and activity of God in the world. The contemporary lector is called to make their ancient witness meaningful and powerful for us who hear these words today. The lector is the medium for scripture, much as a book of print serves as a medium for scripture. The goal of the lector is to be a faithful medium, one who will bring the scripture passage alive for us in our time of worship. In this calling, we are emboldened—even as we recognize both our human potential and our human frailty—to be servants of the Word.¹⁷

BIBLE TRANSLATION FOR PERFORMANCE

With hundreds of translations available in the English language, the choice of which translation to use in the parish is often decided by the congregation or denomination in which we worship. Each translation has a predetermined set of goals.¹⁸ Contemporary Bible translation principles often include three characteristics—the “ABCs”: accurate, beautiful, and clear.¹⁹ The NRSV preface, “To the Reader,” includes a section on “the style of English adopted for the present revision.” It summarizes part of the translators' mandate as “the directive to continue in the tradition of the King James Bible, but to introduce such changes as are warranted on the basis of accuracy, clarity, euphony, and current English usage.”²⁰ It is

¹⁷David Rhoads, “Scripture by Heart—Learning and Performing Bible Passages in Worship: A Short Tutorial” (unpublished manuscript) 2. See also Network of Biblical Storytellers, www.nbsint.org/home and www.gotell.org for suggestions (accessed April 22, 2011). As well, there are several pedagogical articles on the subject at www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org; see especially those related to the course “Scripture by Heart” (accessed April 22, 2011).

¹⁸These goals are usually communicated in the preface or translator notes of a Bible. The websites for two recent translations—a new translation of the NIV (www.biblica.com/niv/accuracy/) and the Common English Bible (www.commonenglishbible.com/Explore/AbouttheCEB/tabid/196/Default.aspx) (accessed April 22, 2011)—discuss at length issues of accuracy and clarity, but include very little about the aural qualities that are so important for listening audiences.

¹⁹I'm grateful for my colleagues at Lutheran Bible Translators for this helpful mnemonic device. Most Bible translation manuals suggest accurate, natural, and clear. An early seminal work that suggested such goals is Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

²⁰The preface “To the Reader,” by Bruce M. Metzger (“for the committee”), is found at the beginning of all copies of the NRSV.

clear throughout this preface that honor is given to the KJV as a masterful translation (albeit with manuscript limitations from its place in history). Eliminating archaic expressions, the NRSV along with many other English translations seeks to imitate the beauty of the KJV language. The word “euphony” suggests this aim in the NRSV preface. “Euphony,” something that pleases the ear, is not noticeable when something is read in silence. The text must be heard.

At the front of the Contemporary English Version of the Bible, we read:

Languages are spoken before they are written. And far more communication is done through the spoken word than through the written word. In fact, more people *hear* the Bible read than read it for themselves....The Contemporary English Version has been described as a “user-friendly” and “mission-driven” translation that can be *read aloud* without stumbling, *heard* without misunderstanding, and *listened to* with the enjoyment and appreciation, because the language is contemporary and the style is lucid and lyrical.²¹

I make no attempt here to suggest which translation is best. That would depend on the purposes of a community or an individual. My suggestion here is simple: don’t forget the communal and aural reception of a translation within the worship setting.

The KJV left a legacy for the English-speaking world. The reasons for its longevity are complex and not without ethical dimensions. The KJV is known today in many circles for its poetic expressions, and most readers recognize its beauty. Since most original audiences heard the KJV in group settings with public performances (just as most first-century Christian audiences heard the Bible), one aspect of the legacy should not be lost in the cacophony of the marketing world of Bible translation: How does a translation lend itself to performance? As a response to the sometimes flattened readings of biblical passages during worship, I have suggested that such communication can benefit from remembering the performative history of the Bible. Increasingly, communities of faith are exploring how they can connect with this past while looking forward to effective communication in today’s world with expectant congregations who are seeking not only to hear but also experience the messages of the Bible. The inspiration derived from the KJV should not be limited to its phrasings and lexical choices. What is truly inspirational is its primary translational goal: “Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light.”²² ⊕

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²¹“Welcome to the Contemporary English Version,” in the front matter to *The Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1995).

²²“The Translators to the Reader,” in the original Preface to the King James Bible. See Appendix A in Burke, *Translation That Openeth the Window*, 224.