



Texts in Context

Mr. Johnston's Axiom: Thoughts on the Tasks of Translation and Preaching¹

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“**T**ranslation is always interpretation,” intoned my Greek teacher, Mr. Johnston, weekly for the three years I studied grammar under him. On the surface, Johnston’s axiom seems to apply to words, syntax, and grammar, but a closer look reveals a comment on communication and understanding. In translation we invariably and unavoidably interpret a text’s meanings, so if we neglect Mr. Johnston’s axiom when we teach or preach, we risk diminishing the richness and complexity of the Bible, or worse yet, confusing our interpretations with the text’s own claims and questions.

In short, the difficulty with translation lies not at the level of the written text or with our techniques but at the deepest level of language, because translators attempt to discern and display not only what a text means, but also to uncover realities to which it can only gesture. As Walter Benjamin has shown, the task of translation is to reveal a text’s ineffable “translatability.”²

¹Robert Johnston taught Koinē Greek at Abilene Christian University from the 1960s until the 1980s. He was a remarkable teacher, and it is a pleasant memory to recall his words some thirty years after he tried to help me become a better reader of biblical texts.

²“Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability”;

Translation is always interpretation, and so is preaching. In their sermons, preachers “translate” biblical texts for contemporary congregations, but they (or their sources) have already translated the sermon text from a biblical language into a contemporary idiom. Each of these steps is inevitably fraught with ambiguity—of which the good preacher must always be aware.

That requires considering Mr. Johnston's axiom from several perspectives, moving from its implications for Greek grammar to its importance for reading and interpreting the Bible. Further, since preaching is a form of interpretation and therefore a form of translation, exploring Johnston's axiom of translation illuminates what occurs when preparing or preaching a sermon.

TRANSLATION AND MEANING

On one level, Johnston's axiom is obvious: translating a New Testament text requires answering questions posed by Greek grammar and syntax. For example, is it better to translate ἡγιασμένοις ἐν Χριστῷ (1 Cor 1:2) as "sanctified *in* Christ" or "sanctified *by* Christ"? The dative case allows for either, but the first option implies a change in spiritual constituency, the second focuses on Christ as the agent of that change. This one "minor" translation decision will inform our understanding of Paul's theology and soteriology in First Corinthians.

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At a deeper level, Johnston's axiom applies to the complex social functions that words play in creating meaning. Consider those Greek and English terms that ostensibly refer to the same object but whose semantic ranges are quite different. This occurs with technical theological terms (e.g., δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ / "righteousness of God"), but also with a language's most mundane terms. Susan Bassnett illustrates the issue. "Even simple lexical items like 'bread' and 'cheese' are perceived to have totally different cultural contexts. The visual image summoned up by the word 'bread' in an American context (presliced, wrapped, white, large and square, used to make sandwiches) will be different from that which the word for 'bread' arouses in Uzbekistan (flat, distributed at meals by the senior male and used with the right hand to assist with eating meat and rice), for example. Yet both words refer to a staple element in the diet of each country, and both exist as dictionary equivalents."³ Bassnett's insight is equally important for New Testament interpretation. The translator or preacher cannot assume that Paul's references to δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ are exhausted by juridical or economical implications of the English "righteousness of God" any more than modern translators can assume "bread" in English corresponds to "bread" in Uzbek. The translator or preacher must do more than exchange words; there must be a dynamic translation of mean-

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969) 71. As I understand Benjamin, the "translatibility" of a text is its unique capacity to reveal the relationship between life and its purposefulness.

³Susan Bassnett, "Translation Theory," in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Grodon, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) 910.

ing and thought that enables a congregation to experience the depth and complexities of its beliefs and rituals.

WHAT MIGHT “ONE” MEAN?

Johnston’s axiom also applies to figurative language, rhetorical tropes, and the fractures of grammar produced by poetry. Consider the difficulty translating into English this short phrase from Eph 4:4–5: εἷς κύριος, μία πίστις, ἕν βάπτισμα. The Greek is simple; conveying the affective force is not. Cosmic and ecclesial unity is a dominant feature of Ephesians (cf. 1:10; 2:13–15), so much so that the author identified the unity of the church as the prime witness to the reconciliation God accomplished through Christ (3:10). He exhorted the congregation to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3) and invoked an ancient credo or a hymn to illustrate his point: “There is *one* body and *one* Spirit, just as you were called to the *one* hope of your calling, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4–6, emphasis added).

The repetition of εἷς (seven times in vv. 4–6) focuses attention on a oneness that is further signaled by the prepositions of verse 6 (“above all and through all and in all”). Together they emphasize the completeness of God’s oneness with humanity and the universe. The stress on oneness in verses 4 and 6 can be expressed in English, but the emphasis in verse 5 (“one Lord, one faith, one baptism”) cannot. In this verse the important terms Lord, faith, and baptism likely were employed not for their content but because each represents one of the three Greek gender designations (Lord is masculine, faith feminine, and baptism neuter). By employing the different forms of the number one (εἷς, μία, ἕν) the author demonstrated, visually and aurally, that God’s unity permeates all gender designations and encompasses every classification, extending to every form of human and spiritual existence. The rhetorical force of the declaration cannot be replicated in translation, because English does not distinguish different genders of the adjective “one.”

Even these few examples demonstrate that Johnston’s axiom is more profound than it first appears; it is an instance of the hermeneutical circle, revealing the consequences of our analytical choices. It suggests that the sheer nature of any language requires every translation to reveal *and* conceal, simultaneously. Every choice that foregrounds one feature of a text causes another to remain in its penumbra. What is true of translation is also true for writing and reading theology and for the practical art of preaching. Thus our attempts to translate “God-talk” into “human-talk” must always embody interpretive humility.

A CASE STUDY: FIRST THESSALONIANS 4:3–6

These examples are products of variations among languages and the vagaries of grammar and so are inevitable. Other complexities arise as a consequence of the

rubrics adopted to translate texts from one language into another. Guidelines are necessary to proceed, but in following them our efforts (both translations and sermons) may preclude audiences from reading or hearing the biblical texts, or, at the least, hinder them from experiencing the Bible's textures and subtleties. We can illustrate this by considering 1 Thess 4:3–6, especially the translations of verse 4 found in the King James Version (KJV) and the Common English Bible (CEB).⁴

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First Thessalonians encouraged and instructed a small, nascent, Christian community. As recent converts, the Thessalonians could have easily succumbed to the pressures of social ostracism or confused their former religious life with their Christian calling. Fearing such deviations, Paul sent this letter to prepare for a visit when he would help “restore whatever is lacking in [their] faith” (3:10).

The third chapter ends with Paul's prayer that God strengthen the Thessalonians' hearts in “holiness” (ἁγιοςύνη) so that they may be blameless before God on the day of judgment. This prepares for an explication of “holiness,” which occurs in chapter 4 when Paul reminds them again how they “ought to live and please God” (vv. 1, 2). Verses 3–8 move from this general exhortation to reflections on the “sanctification/holiness” of those God has called. The verses constitute one sentence in Greek, connected by the repeated use of ἁγιασμός and ἅγιος (3, 4, 7, 8) and framed by references to *God's* will (v. 3) and *God's* gift of the Holy Spirit (v. 8).⁵ Paul begins with instructions about sexual behavior: first, sexual desires, and then, respect for the marriage bonds of fellow Christians (vv. 3–6a). The second half of the sentence (vv. 6b–8) provides three reasons to heed Paul's teaching: the Lord is an avenger judging human conduct; God did not call the Thessalonians to impurity but to holiness; and anyone who rejects this teaching rejects not human ideas but the ethical mores of God. The passage

⁴The Common English Bible: New Testament (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2010) self-consciously understands itself as a modern alternative to the King James Bible, as indicated by its title, a deliberate reference to the nineteenth-century description of the KJV as the “common English Bible.” The CEB preface relates the translator's fundamental commitments and procedures, two of which have a profound influence on its translation choices. First, the CEB translators limit the use of marginal notes, except when there are significant text variants or uncertainties, anomalies of versification, citations of the OT in the NT, and “rarely... [when there are] alternative translations” (CEB, ix). Second, the translation attempts to “use gender-inclusive or neutral syntax for translating pronouns that refer to humans, unless context requires otherwise” (CEB, x). Both of these are reasonable decisions, and, in the second instance, a virtuous one, but, as the example of 1 Thess 4:4 will show, in some cases they result in a translation that does not reflect the originating biblical text.

⁵The connection created by the repetition of ἁγιασμός and ἅγιον is not evident in the KJV because two different words (“sanctification” in vv. 3 and 4 and “holy/holiness” in verses 7 and 8) have been used to translate one stem. The same concealment also occurs in the CEB, because three different phrases are used to translate this single Greek term (“dedicated to him” in vv. 3 and 7, “pure” in v. 4, and “holy” in v. 8). However, the CEB does use footnotes to indicate that the terms could be translated “holy or sanctified.”

demonstrates that holiness transcends religious observance alone and grounds every facet of one's life.

First Thessalonians 4:4–5 is a *crux interpretum* and while Paul is concerned with appropriate sexual mores and conduct, the specific exhortation is unclear. The Thessalonians are to “abstain” from πορνείας, that is, from all illicit sexual behavior, but the nature of the behavior is not stated. His positive alternative allows us to see that he is prescribing conduct that is not controlled by passionate desires, like that of the Gentiles, but by an understanding of a pure and honorable sexual relationship.⁶ Here the difficulties begin, because the terms and syntax of this verse are ambiguous, especially the relationship between the term σκεῦος and the present infinitive κτᾶσθαι.

The Greek can be rendered: “each of you should (‘know’/‘learn’) how to (‘keep’/‘acquire’) his own (‘body’/‘wife’) in ‘holiness’ and ‘honor.’” A literal translation of the term σκεῦος does not fit the context, which requires, therefore, metaphorical equivalents.⁷ As a result, translators have rendered σκεῦος as “wife,” “body,” “vessel,” and “male genitalia,” allowing the verse to be translated either as: “each of you learn to procure a wife” or “each of you learn to control your own body.” Both are defensible; neither is a clear choice.⁸

Translating *skeuos* as “body” is attractive, because it avoids the social construction of women as objects or possessions, but it does not allow κτᾶσθαι to take its regular meaning “to acquire” or “to gain.” It is hard to see how one can “learn to acquire one’s own body,” and so translators must read the infinitive as “to keep” or “take control” (NRSV, NIV, and CEB).⁹ Moreover, reading *skeuos* as “body” renders the reflexive pronoun ἑαυτοῦ superfluous.

Based on the LXX translation of the Hebrew *kelî* in 1 Sam 21:5, *skeuos* has been translated “male member,” which fits with the warning to abstain from sexual immorality, but this also requires *ktāsthai* to take on an unusual meaning. The Hebrew term *ba’al ’išša* functionally corresponds to the Greek *ktāsthai gynaika* (“to take a wife”), so some interpreters, equating *skeuos* and *gynaika*, render the collo-

⁶Often in Jewish polemic, Gentiles were characterized as idolaters (1:10) and their ignorance of God was equated with immorality. This stereotypic language is in the background of Paul’s instructions about sexual immorality.

⁷The term σκεῦος (*skeuos*) means, in a general sense, a “material object used to meet some need in an occupation or other responsibility” (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001] 927). Typically in the NT it is given a more precise meaning, often referring to vessels or dishes, jars, or bowls (cf. Luke 8:16; John 19:29). It is also used metaphorically to refer to the human body (cf. 2 Cor 4:7 and 1 Pet 3:7—here likely to refer to a wife—as in the CEB).

⁸The difficulty is indicated by the different possibilities cited in the commentaries and the multiple options suggested in the periodical literature. See for example, Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 226–229; Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986) 160–165; Torleif Elgvin, “‘To Master His Own Vessel’: 1 Thess 4.4 in Light of New Qumran Evidence,” *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997) 604–619; and David Fredrickson, “Passionless Sex in 1 Thessalonians 4:4–5,” *Word & World* 23/1 (2003) 23–30.

⁹However, as Victor Furnish points out, there is scant lexical evidence for this. Furnish, *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) 89.

cation “to acquire a wife,” which adheres with the larger context of Greek usage.¹⁰ The virtue of this translation is that the infinitive can retain its regular meaning, and Paul’s use of ἕωτοῦ remains in force. The difficulty is that, unless the choice simply reflects a form of patriarchy, it is not obvious why Paul would choose an obscure euphemism when he easily could have written the word γυνή. As Best notes, “No solution can be claimed as wholly satisfactory and new evidence on the use of words could easily tilt the balance in another direction.”¹¹

To return to the implications of Johnston’s axiom, let us consider the translations of verse 4 by the KJV and the CEB. The KJV reads, “That every one of you should *know how to possess his vessel* in sanctification and honour,” while the CEB translation is “and *learn how to control your own body* in a pure and respectable way” (emphasis added). Three differences stand out: (1) the rendering of σκεῦος, (2) the difference between the KJV’s masculine singular “his” and the CEB’s second person plural “your” to translate ἕωτοῦ, and (3) the translation of κτᾶσθαι as “possess” in the KJV and “control” in the CEB.

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The CEB policy to translate personal pronouns as neutral, and its decision to translate *skeuos* as “body,” has Paul making a general statement about chastity or controlling bodily desires. This masks the possibility that the apostle was instructing the men of the congregation about proper procurement of a wife, that is, not based on lust or passion, but in honor. This translation of 1 Thess 4:4 does reflect a first-century patriarchal view of men, women, and marriage, and the older translation might rightly create interpretive problems for contemporary communities of belief, but Paul might have been patriarchal. The CEB translation unintentionally obscures this possibility. It allows a reader (or preacher) to presume that we can adapt Paul’s exhortation to twenty-first-century notions of marriage and fidelity without realizing that the two conceptions of marriage and gender relationships might be different. We can applaud the inclusive translation of the CEB and appreciate its choices in 4:4, but the decision not to note other viable translation options conceals the important interpretive issues. What a reader encounters is possibly not the biblical text, but an interpretation. The absence of a marginal notation hides this disturbing translation possibility from the reader.

As a result, readers are not required to face the challenges of this ancient and

¹⁰See Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 226–228, for the pertinent arguments and citations of the ancient linguistic evidence.

¹¹Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 159.

alien (alienating?) text. If one purpose of biblical study is to encourage communities of belief to debate honestly how they will enact the Scripture, the CEB translation unintentionally diverts that purpose. The KJV has maintained the literal meaning of $\sigma\kappa\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\varsigma$, leaving the original ambiguity of the text intact, causing a reader to experience the indistinct nature of Paul's instructions. Its readers face, in fact, a double ambiguity, as "vessel" does not connote the same semantic meanings to modern readers as it did to ancient ones or those of the Jacobean period. The KJV also allows readers to entertain the possibility that Paul was instructing single males how to choose wives. Again, this may not fit with our understandings of marriage and relationships between men and women, but the KJV translation invites us to discuss the reasons and reasoning that have formed our convictions, helping us better understand marriage and sexual relationships. The translation, like good preaching, prompts us to ask, "What is the relationship of self-control to marriage and the will of God?" and, "How is this best embodied in our social context?"

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As a result, the KJV offers the more accurate translation of 1 Thess 4:4, even though it is more ambiguous. Its readers must reconsider the meaning of this verse and decide through their own deliberations how to enact Paul's instructions. Such readers might arrive at the same decision as that of the CEB translators, but they will do it through interpretive deliberation, not passive acceptance of one translation.

Rightly understood, the goal of translation is not merely to define words or parse sentences, or even to present a paragraph's meaning in language accessible to modern readers. It requires those things, but to stop here is to translate script, not Scripture. Proper biblical translation, through whatever means, occurs only when the text or sermon creates an encounter with the ideas, beliefs, and convictions to which the originating text points. At this moment, we do not translate the biblical text into our language world, we are translated into its language world. So also the preacher shares with the translator the goal of eliciting an encounter with the Word embedded in the words of Scripture.

Walter Benjamin ended his essay on translation with this cryptic statement: "to some degree all great texts contain the potential translation between the lines; this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings. The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation."¹² Surely Benjamin was refer-

¹²Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 82.

ring not to interlinear in a literal sense but to the invisible lines of truth that reside between the written lines of a text. A translation succeeds when it reveals those lines, and a sermon becomes proclamation when it expresses those truths. No translation or sermon is ever complete, therefore, because both aim at something not identical with the text's words, syntax, or semantics. Those truths go beyond the text, pointing to its deeper subject matter, the Word in the words, the highest result of the Bible's "translatability." With Benjamin we must admit that "the transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation which goes beyond the transmittal of subject matter. This nucleus is best defined as the element that does not lend itself to translation. Even when the surface context has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern of the genuine translator remains elusive."¹³

Mr. Johnston's axiom is vital for reminding us that translators and preachers must try to engage us with the indescribable truth to which Scripture points, perhaps an impossible possibility. Properly translated then, 1 Thess 4:4 is neither about marriage nor self-control, but about "comprehending" the existence that undergirds those matters and the character of the One who sustains it. The translation we should read or the sermon we should deliver brings that form of existence and that character before us, whether the encounter originates in the Greek text, the Common English Bible, or the King James Version. ⊕

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¹³Ibid., 75.