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A Discussion of the Guidelines for the Translation of the Standard Works

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1. Unique style and language of the scriptures.

(a) The mind and will of the Lord is given by revelation to various peoples "after the manner of their language." It is couched in the idiom of the people and takes into account their culture, social circumstances, and educational attainments, "that they might come to understanding." (D&C 1:24)

I do not believe there is or could be any disagreement with the statement implicit in this heading. Translators generally agree that the higher the literary quality of the work to be translated the greater and more demanding the task of translation will be and that special literary forms such as poetry and chiastic structure pose special problems for translators (and readers) of the scriptures.

The first paragraph under this heading (a) presents an overriding principle governing the communication between God and man: God speaks to man "after the manner of his own language" so that he may "come to understanding" (D&C 1:24, 2 Nephi 31:3). It is not in the general but in the specific that there may be some disagreement about the application of this statement. I take it to mean that the translator would not include any word, phrase or construction that was not compatible with the internal structure of the language and which could not be readily understood by the reader. For example, the Hebrew and Greek names for weights and measures would have to be translated into receptor language equivalents or at least have an equivalent given in a footnote if they were not readily understandable to the reader. I believe it also means that it would not contain anything that would be meaningless, ambiguous, misleading, overly complicated or unnatural in the receptor language.


1) meaningless 'gird up the loins of your mind' (1 Peter 1:13)
2) ambiguous 'widows indeed' (1 Tim 5:3)
3) misleading 'three or four times' (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13)
4) obscure 'free gift' (Rom 5:15-16)
5) unnatural 'under a bushel' (Matth 5:15)

(b) Whenever the scriptures are translated into another language they lose some of their real and full meaning.
Accordingly, those who study that which has been translated find it harder to gain the full meaning of the scriptures and thus to "come to understanding."

This second paragraph (b) of the guidelines notes that something of the "real and full meaning" is lost whenever the scriptures are translated into another language and that this loss leads to difficulty in understanding the meaning. On the surface there is little room for disagreement, but its implications are broader and deeper. First, there is the assumption that we all know what the original language of the scriptures is. We in the church do not often think beyond the English of the King James Version or the English of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. We are so familiar with the wording, rhythm and interpretation of the biblical text in English that we sometimes forget that the Old Testament was written not in English but mostly in Hebrew and that the New Testament was not written in English but in Greek. Of our standard works, only the Doctrine and Covenants was given originally in English and there are many portions of it that are heavily indebted to the language and style of the King James Version. If we accept the statement mentioned in the first paragraph that God speaks to men after the manner of their own language then I believe it must also be true that every word of God is capable of being expressed in every language spoken by man. It has been formulated succinctly in the phrase: God's word in man's language. While it is true that something is lost in every translation, yes, even in the wording formulated by the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament and by the Greek writers of the gospels and epistles in the New Testament, it is also true that the essence of the message can be conveyed in man's language, especially when the recipient is humble and seeks inspiration. The statement in the guidelines also implies that something was lost in the translation of the King James Version into English and that at least something was lost in the translation of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith. I think it also means that something, however small, was lost in the editing of Mormon and others. But it also implies that the basic, essential meaning intended by God ultimately comes through to man, especially to those who seek to discover it through his spirit. We have very little if any specific information about what the language of God is like (except that we know that God's ways are not man's ways and we expect the language of God to be somehow much better than human language). I believe we are safe in assuming that there is no invisible prompter who makes corrections in the wording recorded by the prophets. Prophets must formulate what they have experienced into their own way of expressing it. We have the direct experience of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery that the translator is the one who has to "study it out." We also know that this is not an easy task because of the limitations imposed by human language (as recorded in 3 Nephi 5:18).

And I know the record which I make to be a just and true record; nevertheless there are many things which, according to our language, we are not able to write.

Additionally, we have the comment of Joseph Smith who said he might
have improved on the translation of a scripture (Mal 4:5-6) but noted that it was plain enough for his purposes (D&C 128:18):

I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands. It is sufficient to know, in this case, that ...

I personally believe the best recommendations are: 1) to follow as closely as possible the meaning of the original text (Hebrew, Greek, English as the case may be) so as to suffer the least possible loss of meaning and 2) to remember that the word of God revealed in one language can be expressed in any other language but perhaps not in exactly the same way.

(c) Translations which follow very closely the words, phrases, and sentence structure, as well as the idiomatic expressions and literary style of the original authors, are the only translations which can convey accurately the true meaning of what the Lord revealed in the original language.

Paragraph 6 presents the crux of the problem on how to translate. The stated goal with which few if any would disagree is to convey accurately the true meaning of the revelation of the Lord in the original language but it goes on to exclude translations which do not follow the words, phrases, sentence structure, idiomatic expressions and literary style of the original authors very closely. From my own personal point of view, it is clear that a misconception about the nature of language colors this explanation of how to translate. Henry Sweet referred to it as the arithmetical fallacy (The Practical Study of Languages (New York: 1900, p. 71-73). He talks about looking at language as though it were simply a matter of filling in the numbers and adding them up.

If language were perfectly rational in this respect, we should be able to handle words like nine digits in arithmetic, and combine them into sentences at pleasure by applying a few simple grammatical rules.

Anyone who has spent time doing translating knows that it is not just simple arithmetic. We know that words for "the same thing" in two languages are not "equal to each other," unless basic meanings and connotations both correspond--and they almost never do. In a little more straightforward language: word-for-word translations are often incorrect, misleading, and even harmful. The literal concordant approach to translation simply does not take into account the essential nature of language. The guidelines exclude non-literal translations out of hand. Etienne Dolet (1509-1546) notes (as quoted in E. A. Nida, Toward a Science of Translating, Leiden, 1964, p.5-16) that word-for-word translations destroy meaning and beauty. In the introduction to The New Testament in Modern English, Revised Edition, New York, 1972), J. D. Phillips says that a translation must not sound like a translation if it is to have the proper tone (or spirit) and have the same effect on the reader.
Glassman quotes Mundhenk on the use of literal expressions (p. 60)

A translator who gives the wrong meaning in this way [by translating literally] has fallen into a very common trap: he thinks that as long as he keeps the "same" words he cannot be too far wrong with the meaning. Instead, what he has done is not translation at all—he has put a new, and therefore wrong, message into the Bible.

He goes on to say that the reason that a translator does this is because he does not really understand the original and that no one can translate a sentence if he does not know what it means in the original. This may be true in the case of unskilled translators but I believe in most cases the real reasons are much more personal and reflect a lack of confidence and insecurity on the part of the translator. Let me read from W. Schwarz (Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation, Cambridge, 1955, p. 51) concerning the traditional view of translation:

They [medieval translators] purposely created a word-for-word translation without intending to substitute for the idiomatic expressions and constructions of the Latin Vulgate those commonly used in any vernacular. [This method] ... was considered to be the surest safeguard against any alteration of the original thought. It was considered to render the contents of the Bible in its entirety without any mistake, and to protect the translator from a change of God's word and from heresy.

There we have it. They translated literally in order to protect themselves from authoritarian administrators who did not understand the nature of language.

(Jack P.) Lewis (The English Bible from KJV to NIV, Grand Rapids, 1982 p. 45), in referring to the use of italics in the King James Version to reflect the fact that a word did not correspond directly to a Greek word in the original says:

"No translation can correspond word-for-word to the language from which it was translated; one need not assume that the KJV is in error in each case where a Greek word has no corresponding word in the English translation. However, the paraphrase within the KJV should be remembered when one evaluates paraphrase in other versions.

As evidence that respected translations are literal, the guidelines note that:

(d) The King James Version of the Bible preserves Hebraisms in great number and makes almost no attempt to water down the doctrines or devise new illustrations adapted to new and different cultures.

First let me deal with the second part of the statement. I know of
no one who advocates watering down the doctrines although some may assume that is what is being done when an example is adapted to a different culture. If we focus on understanding of the original as a guiding principle we should still be able to allow other appropriate illustrations without significant loss of meaning. The assumption that the preservation of Hebraisms by the King James Version proves that it is a literal translation and that literal translations are thus the best translations requires some discussion.

Not every one is happy about the Hebraisms in the KJV of the Bible. In some instances we have been forced to learn these unfamiliar expressions and others we simply tolerate but often do not understand. To quote from Glassman, p. 51:

Commenting on the "double heart" of Psalm 12:2 (ASV), he [Ronald Knox] notes that it doesn't make much sense except as "abnormal anatomical condition, or an obscure kind of convention at bridge." Moreover, "there are hundreds and hundreds of other Hebraisms which we do not notice, because we have allowed ourselves to grow accustomed to them. We should have thought it odd if we had read in The Times 'General Montgomery's right hand has smitten Rommel in the hinderparts' [compare Ps. 78:66]; but if we get that sort of thing in the Bible we take it, unlike Rommel, sitting down. 'Mr. Churchill then opened his mouth and spoke' [Mt. 5:2]--is that English? No, it is Hebrew idiom clothed in English words."

As an example of a Hebraism (or Semitism), let us look at the phrase translated literally from the Hebrew "called his name Jesus" (Matthew 1:21, 23). We have all heard it many times, as a memory verse, especially at Christmas. When a child is born into the home of English speaking parents, they may "call" or "name" the child John or Bill (We'll call him John, We're going to name him Bill), but never "call his name John," unless of course we are alluding to the Bible and want to sound "biblical."

Lewis (p. 60) explains his views on the use of Semitisms.

The reader of the KJV comes across Semitisms that should have been converted into English paraphrases; for example, "she called his name Joseph" should be "she named him Joseph." "Die the death" should be "surely die," "son of peace" should be "peaceable man," and "man of sin" should be "sinful man." These are genitives which in Hebrew are used for superlative degree: "Song of Songs," "King of Kings," "Lord of Lords," and others. Though many of these Semitisms, under the influence of the KJV, have been naturalized into English religious usage, they are still Semitisms and would be clearer if they were rendered into idioms native to English.

Somehow those who advocate literal translation of Hebraisms/Semitisms think it beneath them or unbecoming to "paraphrase." That somehow is
a very negative activity, one to be avoided like leprosy. There are
times however, many more than literalists would admit, that a strict,
literal, word-for-word translation is not possible. If we wish to
make any sense of the original text, we will have to paraphrase. The
LXX had to paraphrase, the Vulgate had to paraphrase, KJV had to
paraphrase, they all have to paraphrase. Given the nature of
language and translation, it is inevitable. In the cases just
mentioned, we can tell by comparing the two versions very carefully
and then estimating the degree of literalness. Though we do not have
the original records from which the Book of Mormon was translated, I
believe we can infer from what Joseph Smith said ("study it out in
your mind," "sufficiently plain") that he too paraphrased, that is he
put it into words that we can understand and that represent what was
intended in the original. Paraphrase is not a watering down of
document, it is absolutely necessary if one is to convey meaning into
another language accurately and completely.

Here I would like to give an illustration of a literal error in the
KJV. The KJV pedantically follows the Greek word order and misses
the meaning of the sentence in 3 John 2: "Beloved, I wish above all
things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul
prospereth" instead of "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good
health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is
getting along well." (Cited in D. A. Carson, The King James Debate,
Grand Rapids, 1979, p. 94.)

Next let me present an example of paraphrase in the KJV. The Greek
expression me genoito occurs 13 times in Paul’s letters. Even though
the word for "God" does not occur in the original Greek, the King
James version paraphrases and renders it "God forbid." Some of the
more sensitive might even consider this formulation a mild form of
blasphemy. It could be translated more literally (negative, 3.
sing., aorist 2, optative) "May it not be," but this literal
rendering would not be readily used or understood today. To catch
the meaning more accurately we might translate as the NIV does "Not
at all!" (Rom 3:4) or "Never!" (1 Cor 6:15).

The other side of the literalness coin is not mentioned at all in the
discussion of the KJV. As part of a long introduction, the
translators specifically mention their viewpoint on literal,
concordant translation--what some have referred to as the "cardinal
defect" of the KJV as far as theological terminology in the New
Testament is concerned. The following excerpt is from the
introduction is taken from The Authorized Version of the Bible
(1611), Cambridge, 1884, p. 300 by F. H. A. Scrivener:

Another thing we think good to admonish thee of, gentle
Reader, that we have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of
phrasing, or to an identity of words, as some peradventure
would wish that we had done, because they observe, that
some learned men somewhere have been as exact as they could
that way. Truly, that we might not vary from the sense of
that which we had translated before, if the word signified
the same thing in both places, (for there be some words
that be not of the same sense everywhere) we were especially careful, and made a conscience, according to our duty. But that we should express the same notion in the same particular word; as for example, if we translate the Hebrew or Greek word once by purpose, never to call it intent; if one where journeying, never travelling; if one where think, never suppose; if one where pain, never ache; if one where joy, never gladness, &c. thus to mince the matter, we thought to savour more of curiosity than wisdom, and that rather it would breed scorn in the atheist, than bring profit to the godly reader. For is the kingdom of God become words or syllables? Why should we be in bondage to them, if we may be free? use one precisely, when we may use another no less fit as commodiously?

Readers of the KJV are indeed confused by the variety of words used by the King James translators. Here is a list of some of the most common ones as listed in Lewis, The English Bible from KJV to NIV, p. 49. (The words to the right in German were chosen to correspond separately to each of the doublets in the King James Version.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English words</th>
<th>German words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>signs</td>
<td>miracles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comfort</td>
<td>consolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creation</td>
<td>creature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apostleship</td>
<td>mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching</td>
<td>doctrine</td>
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<tr>
<td>soul</td>
<td>life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blessed</td>
<td>happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serve</td>
<td>worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>righteous</td>
<td>just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sanctification</td>
<td>holiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everlasting</td>
<td>eternal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authority</td>
<td>power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>charity</td>
<td>love</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lewis (p. 47) also notes that there is no logical justification for the translators choosing a limited number of verses (such as those in 1 Cor 13) and rendering agape in these as 'charity' (borrowed from the Latin Bible) when in all except 26 (all found after 1 Cor 8:1) of its 312 occurrences [92%] agape is rendered 'love.' The existence of these doublets has led some literal minded translators to look for an equivalent for each member of these pairs of words in their languages without reference to the original Greek where no such distinction is made. If a literally minded translator re-translates a non-literal translation back into the original or any other language, he produces a translation that skews and distorts the meaning and spirit of the original text.

Let me summarize on this point. The KJV is quite literal in some areas (Hebraisms, word order, etc.). On the other hand, it is lacking in consistency with respect to spelling, the rendition of proper names (sometimes in Hebrew, sometimes in Greek, sometimes in Latin form) and the doublets listed above. All translators nowadays would agree that major theological terms ("Lamb of God," "savior," "
repentance") should be translated concordantly, that is, with the same word each time. Other words (connectors, prepositions, verb tenses, etc.) do not require the same literal treatment. If, for example, the translator tries to find a separate and distinct word for freely variable conjunctions in King James style, he is forced to use words that do not belong to biblical style at all.

(e) The Book of Mormon falls back naturally into the original language and preserves so accurately the style of each original author that the style variances can be studied and analyzed.

This paragraph in the guidelines talks about the preservation of the "style variances" of each original author, an obvious reference to what has been called "wordprints" (See Alvin C. Rencher, "Who wrote the Book of Mormon? Analysis of Wordprints," pp. 157-188 in Book of Mormon Authorship, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982, Noel B. Reynolds, ed.). With respect to the Book of Mormon, we know that there was at least one editor (Mormon) and one translator (Joseph Smith). Since we do not have the original documents from which Mormon or Joseph Smith worked, we are not in a position to say whether it was a literal translation or not. The writers of the guidelines appear to me to assume that it was a literal translation. If we take Joseph Smith's comments (D&C 9 and 128) seriously, I believe, we must assume that his translations were not as literal as the guidelines seem to imply. In one study, 12 translations of various authors by a single translator were submitted to wordprint analysis (Unpublished paper, "Wordprints in Translated Literature" by K. Black, A. Rencher, M. Folsom). The data were submitted to a similar analysis by another investigator with the same overall result. The translations were certainly not literal to the degree recommended by the guidelines and yet they still yielded significant stylistic differences. We concluded that wordprint characteristics do survive non-literal translations. Since the type of translation Joseph Smith made is unknown, we should be cautious about drawing conclusions about its literalness. Since we do know that stylistic differences are still detectable in non-literal translations into another language, we do not need to recommend literal translation in order to insure the preservation of stylistic differences in the original authors. If the translation is faithful to the meaning and spirit of the original, it will in my opinion also be faithful to the style of the original author and stylistic differences will be detectable by statistical means at least at some level.

The items typically used in wordprint analysis are function words and other features of relative high frequency which exist below the level of consciousness and which are not readily distinguishable as style without the aid of computers and sophisticated statistical analysis (see J. Hilton, K. Jenkins and L. Carroll, "On Maximizing Author Identification by Measuring 5,000 Word Texts," unpublished manuscript, 1968). Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether both a literal and a non-literal translation of the same author would reveal measurable stylistic characteristics. I would guess that any serious translation of various authors by a single translator, whether
literal or non-literal would still yield significant differences when submitted to careful and sophisticated stylistic analysis.

(f) Whether ordinary writings are translated one way of another may be of no particular moment. But when we deal with the word of the Lord we are on sacred ground. We are duty bound to convey the thoughts from language to language in the most accurate, precise, and literal way possible. The scriptures are the scriptures; they are binding upon us; an we have no authority to water down or take from them any of their original meaning and intent.

The last paragraph in the first section again stresses the sacred duty incumbent upon translators of the scriptures. I would draw your attention to the specific reference to word "thoughts" and the phrase "original meaning and intent." When we examine them closely, we see that the guidelines are based on meaning and not on form as is intimated by much of the wording. I have tried to show that the two are intermingled and that there is no careful distinction between meaning and form. If the meaning of the original is given precedence over form, as I believe the guidelines imply, then distortions, abberations, and misunderstandings can be kept to a minimum.

The translation of the meaning and intent of the original is clearly the goal of the guidelines, but they foresee only one way of rendering it accurately into another language, and that is literally, word-for-word. They are source language oriented, or to be more precise, English language oriented. They reflect more concern for the source language (English) than for the language of the peoples who will receive the message and more concern for tradition than for communicating a divine message. They do not even include the possibility that meaning can be conveyed sensitively and accurately without being literal, because, as I have tried to show, they tacitly assume that language is letters and words more than it is meaning.

After all is said and done, we are faced with deciding whether to bring the reader to the text (the literalist, concordant point of view) or to bring the text to the reader (the more recent approach). In my opinion the key to the solution of this dilemma lies in the interpretation of a phrase found in the scriptures themselves (Acts 2:6, Ether 2:39, D&C 90:11, Moses 6:46): "in one's own language." What does it mean when it says that every man shall "hear the gospel in his own tongue and in his own language"? In terms of the discussion here today, I don't think it means to increase the burden of the listener (or reader) by trying to bring the reader to the text. I think it means to take the text to the listener or reader, to clothe the sacred message in the language of the those who are to hear it so that they will come to understanding and be saved.