

Translation Essay: Mathew 5

Translating the Bible from its original Greek or Hebrew has proven to be a daunting task for translators. Written Hebrew actually leaves out vowels, forcing the reader to assume the correct word. All of the New Testament documents were written originally in Greek, so the vowel dilemma was not present. However, moving between two languages as different as Greek and English is still complex. Many Greek words could have multiple meanings in English and vice versa, so picking the correct meaning of words within context becomes the issue for translators.

The fifth chapter of Mathew can be broken down into three major sections. The initial segment of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is labeled The Beatitudes, in which Jesus describes the ideal characteristics of his followers. The second segment is a call for the disciples to take a leadership role in living in what was to become a Christian manner, and the final segment is a discussion on the law given by the Torah.

These sections do not include the first two verses, which simply describe the location of the sermon. The NRSV, the New Living Translation (NLT), Young's Literal Translation (YLT), and GOD'S WORD (GW) all state that Jesus ascended a mountain or mountain side to deliver his sermon to the disciples, while the Message and the Good News Translation (GNT) say he went up on a hill and spoke to the disciples. Either way, all six translations portray the same concept of Jesus climbing up to deliver his take on the law. Just as Moses received the law from God on Mount Sinai, the disciples received the new law on a mountain from Jesus.

Verses 3 through 12 comprise the segment defining characteristics of Jesus' followers. Each of these verses in the NRSV and in GW take the form: blessed are the people who have this characteristic. Similarly, the Message takes the form: you are blessed if you have this characteristic. However, the YLT and the GLT inform the reader that those displaying the characteristics mentioned by Jesus are happy instead of blessed. Although happy or content is one definition of blessed, using the term blessed can

Comment [1]: Excellent paper uses all 5 translations as well as the Interlinear bible (to get sense of original Greek words)

Comment [2]: Organizes by theme or section, rather than by translation. This organizational plan allows the author to be more specific and to look more closely at the original words.

Comment [3]: Identifies a difference

cover more concepts. Blessed could also mean divinely favored or worthy of reverence or worship. The NLT takes the term blessed to the next step and states that God blesses those who display the mentioned characteristics. This translation informs the audience that the meaning of blessed truly means divine favor, which is considerably better than simply being happy.

Comment [4]: Paragraph analyzes the potential effect of using “happy” as opposed to “blessed.”

There are also discrepancies in some of the characteristics Jesus is talking about in this section. NRSV 3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “ Here the Greek word for poor is *ptochos*. In addition to poor, *ptochos* can mean lowly, afflicted, helpless, powerless to accomplish an end, needy, or lacking in anything. GW 3 uses the “helpless” definition of *ptochos*. GW 3: “Blessed are those who recognize they are spiritually helpless. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them.” Although the use of the word “poor” can cover the majority of the definitions of *ptochos*, “helpless” brings a clearer understanding to verse. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” could mean that those lacking spirituality are blessed, which is somewhat counterintuitive. However, the version of verse 3 from GW requires that the person realize he or she is spiritually helpless, whereas the NRSV only requires the person to be lowly in spirit.

Comment [5]: Italicize foreign words

Comment [6]: Use quotes to discuss the author’s use of a particular term

Comment [7]: Student carefully analyzes the effect of the different translations of *ptochos*

The Message, which is very much a dynamical equivalence, provides a complete paraphrase of the text’s meaning. Message 3: “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.” The first sentence appears to use the afflicted definition of *ptochos*. Instead of being spiritually helpless, this version suggests that to gain Jesus’s favor you must be the feel down or depressed. More importantly, the second sentence says nothing about the person displaying the characteristic owning the kingdom of heaven. The version given by the Message suggests that the less there is of humanity the more room there is for God, and that is a good thing. This is a great example of translators slightly shifting the reading of a passage to deliver their own beliefs, which is common and tough to avoid in a dynamical equivalence.

Verses 13 through 16 describe the responsibility of the disciples to live a righteous life. All six translations cited portrayed the same general meaning within the four verses. Each version of verse 13 describes the disciples as the salt or seasoning of the earth and humankind. In other words, they are the flavoring that makes the world good, but if they were to lose their goodness they cannot get it back. Each version of verses 14 through 16 refer to the disciples as the light of the world. Jesus has produced this light which is made the equivalent of lighting a lamp. Verse 15 states that one does not hide a lit lamp under something (the object the lamp is hidden under varies between translations). The lamp is placed on a lamp stand for everyone to see. Therefore, Jesus wants his light in the darkness, his disciples, to go out and do good works so that others will turn to God.

In the remainder of the chapter, Jesus discusses the law, but this section may also be broken down into two more sections. In verses 17 through 37, Jesus amplifies the laws of Moses, making them even harsher. However, there is a discrepancy among the six translations before Jesus begins to add to the law. In the NRSV, the NLT, the Message, and YLT versions of verse 17, Jesus has not come to do away with the law. He has come to fulfill it. The message actually uses the word “complete” instead of fulfill. The Greek word used here was *pleroo*, which could mean to complete in every particular, ratify, accomplish, fulfill, render perfect, or fulfill. Therefore, the use of “fulfill” or “complete” serves basically the same purpose. Jesus has come to announce the law the way God intended it to be followed. He will render the law perfect. On the other hand, the translations offered by GW and the GNT state that Jesus has come to make the laws come true. This wording puts a prophetic twist on Jesus’ goals. The laws given to Moses were commandments. They cannot come true because they were not predictions, but these translations suggest Jesus was referring to prophecies made in the Old Testament (probably about the Messiah) rather than to the Torah..

The major concepts of Jesus’ amplification of the law hold in each of the six translations with only minor discrepancies. One example of a law ratified by Jesus is that of divorce. In every translation,

if a man divorces his wife for any reason but unfaithfulness, in which case she is all ready an adulteress, he has caused her to commit adultery, and therefore, he is guilty of adultery. An example of a discrepancy in the translations is seen in Jesus' teaching on swearing to hold an oath. The NRSV, the YLT, GW, and the GNT all state that anything more than a yes or no to give your word comes from the evil one. The YLT actually says that swearing is "of the evil." Either way these passages are likely referring to Satan. Therefore, they boldly state that Satan is involved with our oaths and has caused us to reduce God's holiness. However, the Message and the NLT do not mention the presence of Satan. They simply state that swearing is wrong.

The final 11 verses of the chapter involve Jesus changing the law that was originally in place. In verses 43 to 48, Jesus challenges Moses' teaching to love your friends and hate your enemies. NRSV 44-45: But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. The statement, "you may be children of you father" suggests that you are not a child of God unless you can love everyone. This concept also appears in YLT and in the GNT, which says you may become a child of God if you love your enemies. However, the NLT and GW only say that you can demonstrate that you are a child of God by loving your enemies. These versions suggest that the disciples, or everyone, are already children of God. They simply need to act like it. The Message actually states that by loving our enemies, we are showing our true, God-created selves.

After analyzing several translations of Mathew 5, I perceive that the meanings of passages can be altered in the translation process. Many of the Greek words from the original writings of Mathew have multiple meanings in English. Some translations simply try to paraphrase the meaning of the Greek text in English form, but the reader should be aware that such translations may reflect the beliefs and the interpretations of the translators. Formal equivalences, which attempt to stick to literal word for word translation, may be more true to the original writing, but word for word translations often do not

Comment [8]: DM/MM: Make sure the subject of modifying phrase is the same as the subject of main clause. Make sure modifying phrase is closest to noun or phrase it modifies.

Comment [9]: The subject of "analyze" must be the person doing the analyzing; that person must be mentioned as the first noun in the main clause

make sense in English. Therefore, the reader must accept that some paraphrasing is necessary to obtain some flow and intelligibility.

On a more positive note, the major conceptual themes portrayed in Mathew 5 were prominent in all six of the translations analyzed. In most cases, discrepancies within the text were minor. If read in deep detail, different translations could promote ideas not in the original Greek, but the overall context was mostly accurate.

Comment [10]: Excellent analysis. One of the most hotly contested of the beatitudes is "blessed are the meek." One of the things I learned looking at the Greek is that "meek" is not exactly what Jesus meant, and that was a great relief to me.