

## TRANSLITERATION, TRANSLATION, AND PARAPHRASE

At Torah study the other night, I noticed a few puzzled looks when David was describing the difference between “transliteration”, “translation”, and “paraphrase” as these words pertain to our various English versions of the Scriptures. I thought it might be helpful to give a quick explanation of each of these three terms and share an example or two.

First – **TRANSLITERATION**. Transliteration is the process of converting one alphabet into another alphabet phonetically.

In some cases, different languages use the same alphabet (or nearly the same alphabet). English and Spanish for example, use much the same alphabet and “transliteration” is not necessary. For example the word “shoe” in English is “zapato” in Spanish. They are different words, obviously, but both languages use the same alphabet.

Greek and Hebrew, on the other hand, use completely different alphabets from English. Therefore, “transliteration” is required. This is possible because most languages share the same sounds phonetically. For example, the sound of the letter D in English is “duh”. The sound of the letter ד (dalet) in Hebrew is also “duh”, as is also the sound of Δ δ (delta) in Greek. The letters look different, but they share the same sound. This is true with all the Greek and Hebrew letters; that is, they share the same sounds phonetically with English.

Therefore, one can take a Greek word – εἰρήνη, for example – and using “transliteration” write the word in English letters as “*eirene*”. Similarly, one can take a Hebrew word – שלום, for example – and write the word in English as “*shalom*”. The words have not yet been “translated”; they have been simply “transliterated”.

Secondly, **TRANSLATION**. Translation is the process of converting the definition of a word from one language into its equivalent word in a second language. Converting the Spanish word “zapato” into the English word “shoe” (or vice-versa) is an example of “translation”. Most English versions of the Bible are “translations” – more or less. (As an aside, both εἰρήνη and שלום, used in the example above, are translated as “peace”.)

One problem that occurs during the process of translation is that the grammar of one language will often sound either *awkward* (or in some cases, actually *nonsensical*) if “literally translated” into another language. A simple example is the Hebrew greeting: בוקר טוב. The “transliteration” of this greeting is “*boker tov*”. The “literal translation” would be “morning good” – *boker* means “morning” and *tov* means “good”. But “morning good” sounds awkward in English. Therefore, the acceptable “translation” of בוקר טוב into English is “good morning”. All translations of the Bible (whether from Hebrew or Greek) into English must deal with these kinds of issues. Therefore, no English translation can be a pure “literal translation”. The translators of the Bible must take the vagrancies of English grammar vs. Hebrew and/or Greek grammar into consideration.

A second issue in making a translation is that there are some words in one language which have no direct equivalent in another language. A great example of this is the Hebrew word חסד. The transliteration of this word is “kesed”. This word has no direct English equivalent, because in Hebrew it denotes an entire range of concepts. חסד is variously translated as “mercy”, “goodness”, “grace”, “kindness”, “favor”, and “lovingkindness” and all of these words are used in one place or another in our English translation of the word חסד in the *Tanak*.

A third issue that confronts the translator is that some “concepts” or “metaphors” in one language,

will either sound nonsensical, be completely misinterpreted, or even sound offensive if directly translated into another language. One rather dramatic example of this is found in Romans 11:1. The King James translates the first part of this verse as: *“I say then, hath God cast away His people? God forbid.”*. However, the phrase “God forbid” does not appear in the Greek in this verse. Instead, Paul used the single word μή (transliterated as “me”). This Greek word μή is defined as a “primary particle of qualified negation which denies the very thought of the thing”. In fact, this word denotes such a strong and forceful concept of negativity, that in today's English, probably the best rendering of μή would be *“Hell, no!!!”*. Obviously the translators were not about to put that in the Bible, so instead we get such things as “God forbid” (KJV); “Certainly not” (NKJV); “Of course not” (NLB); “May it never be.” (NASB), and “By no means.” (RSV) to name a few. All of these renderings are less offensive, but clearly convey a watered down concept of the very strong point that Paul was trying to make by using the Greek word μή .

And finally, **PARAPHRASE**. A paraphrase is simply the attempt to express the meaning of something written or spoken using different words, hopefully to improve the clarity of the original. The New Living Bible is an example of an English paraphrase version of the Scriptures because most – although not all – of the verses are paraphrases rather than translations.

For example, John 1:4 in Greek is: ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων. A fairly literal word for word translation would read something like this – *In him life was and the life was the light to all humanity*. That sounds a little bit awkward in English, so most English translations give us something like – *In Him was life, and that life was the light of men (or the light of all mankind)*. The New Living Bible paraphrase, on the other hand, renders this verse as: *The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone*.

One can readily see that although this is not a true “translation” of the original words, the concept is still conveyed fairly accurately. The downside, of course, is that a paraphrase has the potential of being influenced by the particular theological bias of the person or persons doing the paraphrasing, which is why many people prefer to read a “translation” rather than a “paraphrase” version of the Scriptures.

The bottom line is that no translation from the original Hebrew or Greek into English is perfect. Each language has its own concepts, metaphors, expressions, and grammatical nuances which make a word for word literal translation virtually impossible. Therefore it's helpful, I think, to look up the original Hebrew or Greek word when possible in order to capture the various and subtle shades of meaning that may be there. It's also important to look at more than one English translation to see how another translator or group of translators rendered a word, phrase, or concept. A good website to help you do this is... [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org) .

If we truly believe that we live on a planet where the Creator of the Universe has spoken to us through Moses and the Prophets, and then visited us in human form as Yeshua the Messiah, then the record of those teachings, and of Yeshua's life and sayings are of supreme importance to the entire human race. The Hebrew *Tanak* and the Greek *Brit Chadashah* are, therefore, in my opinion, the most important documents in the world!

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