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The Mystery and Mirage of Equivalence: Bible Translation Theory and the Practice of Christian Mission

Yancy Smith

Since the era of Eugene Nida, evangelical Bible translation has been revolutionized by his notion of dynamic or functional equivalence. Powerful theological and theoretical concerns, however, call into question its usefulness and its catholicity. This article explores and questions the usefulness of the equivalence model of translation in Christian mission from the standpoint of incarnation.

God wanted to possess the earth so much that he sent his only son so that whoever was deceived by him would not perish but would become a wandering ghost forever.

—John 3:16 (First draft, local translator, Ziga translation, Burkina Faso)¹

“If politics is the art of the possible, translation is the art of the impossible.”² In an article with great significance for Bible translation theory and Christian mission, Andrew Walls described translation in exceptionally clear terms:

Exact transmission of meaning from one linguistic medium to another is constantly hampered not only by structural and cultural difference; the words of the receptor language are pre-loaded, and the old cargo drags the new into areas uncharted in the source language. In the end the translator has simply to do his best and take risks in a high-risk business.³

A translation like the Ziga of John 3:16, “incorrect” in one sense, nonetheless, represents what the biblical text “meant” in the cultural milieu of Ziga translators. Like any translation, it is provisional. All translations are provisional in that they look forward to a better translation that is already and always yet to come. In this case, the cultural mismatches between modern tribal Africa and the ancient Mediterranean make the translated words of the Greek text of John sound more like a version of hell rather than “eternal life.” Worst of all, Jesus and Father God take on strange, grotesque characteristics. Translation has this capacity to provoke the uncanny experience of the strange in the familiar—what is known as “contained alterity.”⁴ That is, through a limited encounter, we experience the uniqueness of our enculturated selves in the presence of the culture of the other. Perhaps this is a place for the extension of hospitality⁵ or of hostility. We read and perhaps we laugh but then perhaps look forward to the translation’s future perfection when, through careful editing, and with the help of a consultant, the text achieves “equivalence” with the meaning of the original text, even if that perfection is unattainable. For translation—as imperfect in practice as unrealizable in theory—brings diplomats together in ongoing discussions, extends hospitality in family settings, and mediates street-corner debates and cross-cultural encounters in cafés, hospitals, churches, court-rooms, and schools. Translation is at the heart of constant interchange in urban centers as well as remote areas. Yet translation becomes weaponized in the interrogation cells of Guantanamo, in the streets of Damascus, and in the mountains of Tibet.⁶ Translation is not only possible; it is necessary to human life in its intercultural processes as we know them.

Translators know⁷ that to facilitate audience understanding they must make major and minor adjustments for differences between languages.⁸ Semantics, information structures, social pragmatics, and basic cultural assumptions vary greatly from one language to another.⁹ Such adjustments often make translators suspect, as if they betray the original. Indeed, translators are caught in an intractable double bind of fidelity and betrayal. As Friedrich Schleiermacher said it: “Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader.”¹⁰

The ancient Talmudic conundrum on marriage betrothal illustrates this rock-and-hard-place position. In ancient Judaism, ideally only a man who was able to read Scripture (Aramaic: *karanaya*) could become

betrothed to a woman. But what does it mean to “read Scripture?” In the Aramaic-speaking Jewish community of Babylon, “reading Scripture” also meant translating the Hebrew text into Aramaic, and translating is inherently dangerous!

Our Rabbis taught: “On condition that I am able to read the Scripture,” once he has read three verses of the Pentateuch in the synagogue, she is betrothed. R. Judah said: “He must be able to read and translate it. Even if he translates it according to his own understanding!” But it was taught: R. Judah said: “If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar; if he adds to it, he is a blasphemer and a libeler.” Then what is meant by translation? Our translation!¹¹

The Talmudic escape from the double bind was to prescribe the translation and carefully define “reading.” The obvious problem would be, if the “reader” memorized both the Hebrew text and the Targum, could he be said to “read?” The answer to that was to specify two different kinds of “reader”: one casual (Aramaic: *karanaya*) and one professional (Hebrew: *kara*). Double binds require creative solutions.

Beyond the well-known saw “translator is a traitor,” the translator may experience a sense of self-betrayal. A translator re-reads his or her translation after the passage of time and thinks, “How could I have done this?” For as the translator moves on and changes, the original text also seems to change. In this case, the earlier self betrays the later self, or vice versa. Recently I experienced this sense of self-betrayal as I worked with some translators on a pilot project for a French language translation. After having spent years working on a Creole translation, I hoped my experience would facilitate consulting with the French language translators. I began with great excitement to consult with them, thinking the Creole experience would make my work easier. However, the previous translation proved to be a straitjacket at times from which I had to design an escape. Here is back-translated Creole John 1:16–17:

Yes, he was so full of the love and the truth for us,
we all receive a blessing in his hand one after another.
for God had given us only the law through Moses,
but love and the truth come only through Jesus Christ.

Of the several translation issues raised by this passage, the most salient at the time seemed to be the lack of a coordinating conjunction in verse 17 in the Greek text. The natural relation between the two clauses seemed to be a contrast. Providing the passage with a “but” (men) was the solution. The giving of the law was in stark contrast with “grace and truth” that come through Jesus Christ. Indeed, verse 18 confirmed our understanding: “No one has ever seen God”¹² indicated a fundamental flaw with the Law of Moses. Perhaps Paul’s opposition of “law and grace” also guided our translation. Popular translations like the NIV and the NRSV simply put a semicolon between the two clauses, thus leaving an apparent ambiguity. Of course the Greek text had no punctuation and, indeed, the addition of a semicolon is also a translation.

Further work on the same text, this time translating into French, proved our previous translation woefully inadequate. Verse 16 took on a new light, especially the phrase: “we all receive grace after grace.” Once we put aside the influence of Paul, we could see verse 17 as describing two instances of the succession of gracious gifts mentioned in verse 16 rather than a stark contrast of the ungracious (or somewhat gracious) Law of Moses followed by truth and grace in Jesus Christ. The resulting translation was:

The Word was so rich that he has given us all
one blessing after another.
For God gave the Law through Moses,

then love and the truth came by Jesus, the King sent by God.

Like the NIV and NRSV translators who put a semicolon between the clauses of verse 17, we were forced by French grammar to translate a nothing into a something, whether a comma or a *puis* or a *mais*. Whichever “something” we put in its place turns out to be very significant. Just as John 1:1 is an invitation to re-enter the reading of the Law of Moses from a new perspective, so this passage continues that invitation to re-read the Bible and all of life through a new entry point: the life of God revealed in the person of Jesus. Perhaps both the Creole and French translations are “equivalent” to the Greek text; however, neither translation is equivalent to the other. If the original text is equivalent to two translations not equivalent to themselves, the notion of equivalence becomes problematic. This is true even if we accept a careful caveat about “equivalence”: that perfect equivalence is impossible. What we really have is polyvalence with a certain correspondence. Is the text’s ambiguity the point? Would an ambiguous translation of the passage, then, be an equivalent translation? We have no way of knowing.

Despite its problematic nature, translation has also served as a model for Christian mission.¹³ A “translation model” of mission is rather common and usually depends upon a notion of textual equivalence between original texts and their translations.¹⁴ The “meaning” is assumed to be stable and functions as a sort of *tertium quid*, like a textual version of the logos of John 1:1. Somehow and somewhere that meaning exists independently of any translation. Sometimes the meaning is thought to be “in the text” or “in the mind of God” or perhaps available in the consensus of the community of scholars. In our minds, meaning’s ghostly presence functions to endorse the equivalent value of the text. But it is not really possible to separate “the meaning” of the text from any person’s interpretation of the text. The meaning is always an understanding: always, already an interpretation.

For mission, the “unchanging message of the gospel, in other words, is regarded as ‘translatable’ into non-Western cultural categories without being compromised. But such efforts . . . needed to be done with extreme caution. Such ‘ethno-theology’ might easily be trapped in syncretism and become instead expressions of ‘Christopaganism.’ ”¹⁵ It seems that a translational model of mission that depends upon a notion of equivalence would have the same problems as equivalence in translation. And here the introduction of the term equivalence bedevils clear thinking. Charles Kraft, following Eugene Nida, opposed “formal correspondence” with “dynamic equivalence.”¹⁶ Nida and others like Kraft could well have used “dynamic correspondence” as a match for “formal correspondence” of the literalists. Both Kraft’s and Nida’s practical ideas about audience-oriented translation have been robust and proven in the field. Yet, the theory of equivalence is a stone of stumbling. One suspects that Nida’s introduction of “equivalence” was a tactical move against literalists. Equivalence claims authority over against literal translations. Since that time, so-called literalists matched dynamic equivalence with a formal “equivalence” of their own.¹⁷

Walls reframed translation as a metaphor for mission by grounding all translation in the incarnation, not by seeing translation merely as a metaphor for mission. “Incarnation is translation.”¹⁸ The Christian Scriptures, then,

are not the Torah with an updating supplement. The translation of the speech of God, not just into human speech but into humanity, implies a different type of encounter with the divine. Much misunderstanding in Christian-Muslim relations has occurred from the assumption that the Bible and Qur’an have analogous status in the respective faiths. But the true Christian analogy with the Qur’an is not the Bible, but Christ.¹⁹

But translation, whether linguistic or divine, is always culture specific:

When Divinity was translated into humanity, he did not become generalized humanity. He became a person in a particular locality and in a particular ethnic group, at a particular place and time. The translation of God into humanity, whereby the sense and meaning of God was transferred, was effected under very culture-specific conditions.

The implications of this broaden if we take the Johannine symbol of the Word made flesh along with the Pauline symbol of the Second Adam, the Ephesian theme of the multi-ethnic New Humanity which reaches its full stature in Christ, and with Paul's concern for Christ to be formed in the newly founded Gentile churches. It appears that Christ, God's translated speech, is re-translated from the Palestinian Jewish original. . . . In other words, national distinctives, the things that mark out each nation, the shared consciousness and shared traditions, and shared mental processes and patterns of relationship, are within the scope of discipleship. . . . The first divine act of translation into humanity thus gives rise to a constant succession of new translations. Christian diversity is the necessary product of the Incarnation.²⁰

The process of Bible translation reflected in the diversity of its products, then, is at the heart of the Christian faith. "Perhaps no other specific activity more clearly represents the mission of the Church."²¹ This means the issues of Bible translation theory and practice are the issues of incarnation.²² The process breeds diversity so that new translations, by taking the biblical word about Christ into a new culture and applying it to new situations, have the potential to reshape and expand the Christian faith.²³ Such a view of translation depends not upon equivalence but upon creative difference, even if the translation process must always proceed with the originals at hand, in correspondence to them and in the light of both past and present readers' understandings of them. Therefore, correspondence is not one-sided but is a relationship of creative tension within a tradition.

Walls points to the translational activity when Jewish followers of Jesus missionally provoked "the first real encounter of the Christian faith with the pagan world" as "one of the most critical events in Christian history." The text hints at the radical nature of what happened in Antioch in several ways. The first hint is that the gospel was presented to non-Jews in terms of the "Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20). In previous proclamation, says Walls, the significance of Jesus was expressed by the use of the Jewish title "Messiah," which translates literally in Greek as *christos*. However, the anonymous Cypriots and Cyrenians spoke to Antiochene Gentiles in terms that they could better understand. Jesus was Lord (*kyrios*), "the title Hellenistic pagans gave to their cult divinities" and, we should add, to Caesar. Such a move was as radical as it was vital. It was radical because, for the first time, the gospel message was presented in terms that moved beyond the boundary of Judaism. It was vital because it is doubtful whether the Gentiles to whom the gospel was preached "could have understood the significance of Jesus in any other way." The substitution of a word (not an equivalent) symbolizes a quantum leap beyond equivalence into missionary significance.²⁴

Eugene Nida popularized the phrase "dynamic equivalence" along with "functional equivalence,"²⁵ as opposed to "formal correspondence," however, to indicate something more than a relationship between texts. Rather, the translator seeks equivalence between the experience of the current receptors of the translation and the first receptors of the original message: a lofty goal. Some might say, a mirage. The translator must determine what the first readers and hearers thought and felt and then seek to recreate that impact on the intended audience. Nida used the phrase "closest natural equivalent" to define translation: "From the viewpoint of the Bible translator the most satisfactory definition of translation seems to be the 'closest natural equivalent,' first in meaning and secondarily in style."²⁶ While this definition of translation served more than a generation of scholars as either foundation or foil, the lucidity of Nida's copious examples of linguistic and cultural adjustment necessary for communication through translation radically changed the theoretical debate between "free" and "literal translation." In response to criticism and new understandings in linguistics, Nida developed the theory of equivalence with considerable sophistication and finesse beyond "the closest natural equivalent" as a way of mediating between literal translation and the free translation of ideas.²⁷ In practice the golden mean between literal and free translation created a gap between form and content. Water poured into different shapes of containers is still water. Meaning, Nida argued, was in the content rather than the form.²⁸ However, it is important to consider the rhetorical²⁹ and performative move in creating the very category of "equivalence" (instead, say, of "correspondence") for acts of communication in translation in the first place. Equivalence is a metaphor borrowed from mathematics. For example $2+3+2 = (2+12)/2 = 7$. Equivalence in that sense is established abstractly and may be supported by concrete observation. In the realm of translation (and mission), however, the category may create as many problems as it solves.³⁰ Correspondence, on the other hand, is a more open and flexible category, which might have led to a different outcome than the double bind of equivalence:

translators are usually aware of their failure to produce translations that are in a semantic sense equivalent to the original. However, audiences desire translations with authority equal to the original and often appreciate the label “equivalent” because it means equal meaning and authority. The label “equivalence” effaces (either by neglect or by unwarranted veneration) the very human participation of the human translators.³¹

The overall positive effect of Nida’s theory was to dislodge the notion of “faithfulness” as a translation desideratum from its moorings in literal translation and associate “faithfulness” with dynamic or functional equivalent translations. The principles and practices associated with dynamic or functional equivalence liberated translators from a nagging sense that “faithfulness” meant adherence to a rigid system of word-by-word consistency, especially in relation to biblical and key theological terms.³² Theorists have continued to use “equivalence,” extending and subtly enriching it. Anthony Pym, for example, suggests that the “assumed similarity between source text and translation” is what distinguishes translations from all other kinds of texts.³³ While it appears undeniable that “assumed similarity” between source text and target text is a distinctive feature of translation, this is a far cry from equivalence. Pym attempts to rescue equivalence by introducing “directional equivalence” as opposed to Nida’s natural equivalence.³⁴ Directional equivalence, then, is an oxymoronic “asymmetric equivalence.” This approach has not been very convincing.³⁵ What is the value of an asymmetric equivalence? Better to drop equivalence altogether and speak of “asymmetric similarity and difference” or perhaps “dynamic substitution.” Nida himself did not believe perfect equivalence was achievable. Rather, he recommended “the closest natural equivalence” or “functional equivalence.” The first indicates that equivalence must always remain approximate—more or less equivalent. The second phrase suggests that equivalence might depend upon the assumed purpose the equivalence is to achieve. In either case, borrowing the word equivalence from mathematics as a metaphor for translation has the effect of creating the expectation of a more dependable kind of outcome than translation can achieve. As Dave Brunn recently wrote, “The term ‘dynamic equivalence’ (also called functional equivalence) is potentially misleading in the same way that the term ‘formal equivalence’ is. It would be more accurate to call it dynamic (or functional) approximation.”³⁶

The practice of translating sacred texts has been a constant source of theoretical reflection from the earliest times. Indeed, “the practice of translation remains a risky operation which is always in search of its theory.”³⁷ The writers of the New Testament do not appear to have given much thought to equivalence as criterion for their choice of sources for Old Testament quotations. For example, Isaiah has, “The people who walk in darkness” (Isa 9:2), while Matthew has, “The people who sat in darkness” (Matt 4:16; cf. Psalm 107:10). These can only be roughly equivalent. Neither Augustine nor Jerome, Christianity’s first real theorists of language and translation, thought equivalence with the original was necessarily desirable. Augustine counseled that Latin translations should conform to the Greek Septuagint because (repeating the legend of the Epistle of Aristeas) the inspired Septuagint translation was superior to the Hebrew original and had thus replaced it.³⁸ Jerome, in his Letter to Pammachius, coyly defended his translation practice, saying, “Indeed, I not only admit, but freely proclaim that in translation [interpretatione] from the Greek—except in the case of Sacred Scripture, where the very order of the words is a mystery—I render not word for word, but sense for sense.”³⁹ That is, wherever necessary to maintain a mystery of the church, Jerome would translate in accordance with the preservation of the mystery. For Jerome, differences in translation “are harmonized” or “atoned” for by “oneness of spirit”⁴⁰ (or the unity of the Spirit).⁴¹ Indeed, such concord in the unity of the Spirit demands difference rather than equivalence. Without difference, harmony of spirit is impossible. While it is clear that equivalence is an evangelical ideological notion, it is equally clear that it is not theologically catholic. That is, as the notion of textual equivalence becomes stricter in translation, it may allow proportionately less creative diversity, diversity that is necessary according to Walls’s understanding of the translation process in Christianity. And while the translation of Christianity’s sacred texts has proceeded along with its missionary advance, it has often been bold translation moves that have fractured previous frozen consensus, disseminated Christianity, and provoked its growth. Sometimes written translation has lagged behind missionary expansion; at other times, written translation has preceded expansion into new territories.⁴²

One should pause to honor Nida and all the good that his theoretical contributions made to translation theory and practice. His constituencies were broad and diverse, and he created a welcoming and hospitable

space for healthy dialogue. His evangelical constituency might not have been able to receive new ideas about translation without “equivalence” to support departures from literalism. But it remains an ideological formulation. For Christians it should be no surprise that ideology motivates and shapes Bible translation and that translation produces asymmetric similarity and difference in its products. Bilingual individuals have always recognized that something is inevitably lost and found in translation. Translation changes the original text. Whether ideology is at work consciously or unconsciously is no matter. After all, mission may be seen as a sort of ideological promotion, whether of the reign of God or the incarnated life of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Or, if we prefer, we may see Bible translation rooted in the ancient church’s practice of including the other by translating in the earliest liturgical practice, “Abba (Aramaic), ho Pater (Greek)!” (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). In that context, “Maranatha!” (1 Cor 16:19) cries out for translation, to borrow a phrase from Derrida,⁴³ even though, ultimately, for Paul an equivalent translation without self-betrayal might not have been possible at the moment he wrote it. From this perspective translational practice is an extension of the liturgical life of the saints, which in all its messy, embodied presence expresses the mission of God.

But difficulties arise in the ethics of motives mixed with cultural imperialism. Further complicating this issue, Christians often forget that Bible translations are all-too-human products. “Translation is as much a problem as a solution.”⁴⁴ Perhaps this is why a thick fog often surrounds translation. Many consumers of Bible translations around the world are not aware of the fog, but simply read their translations as The Bible or The Word of God with negligible human intervention. In other words, insofar as they are aware their Bible is a translation it is—in a potent sense—equivalent to the original. However, where Bible translations have proliferated—each one for a different purpose, market, or audience—the very significant differences between the translations provoke the nagging question of the unstable relationship between the original and the various translations. This difference is healthy. A multiplicity of versions in prolific mimicry of the original⁴⁵ serves the vitality of the church in the postcolonial situation by provoking resistance to the false, imperialistic notion that only one translation (or interpretation) of the gospel is possible. Where possible, more translations are better than one.

Translational equivalence, as envisioned by Nida as both a stable and objective relationship between texts, cannot stand careful scrutiny. Indeed, the more carefully one questions stable and objective equivalence, the more ideological it appears. Many have attempted to salvage equivalence as a category in translation theory by the addition of the adjective dynamic to equivalence, with a nod to the fact that perfect equivalence is not possible. If we substitute “more or less” for dynamic, we get closer to the truth. A dynamic equivalence, more-or-less equivalence, approximate equivalence, however would seem to beg the question whether equivalence is the appropriate notion. It is far better to speak of “dynamic substitution” of one text for another or “correspondence” with similarity and difference between texts—or, rather, similarity and difference between interpretations of texts, since all translation is interpretation.⁴⁶ Indeed, translation without interpretation is a rudderless ship. Nevertheless, equivalence could yet be a useful notion for translation theory. One may think of equivalence in economic or community terms. That is, it functions by social convention and by performative declaration. For example, “the US dollar is trading at 101 yen.” Such a notion of equivalence may well be objective but unstable. In that sense a translation may be considered equivalent to the original for certain purposes and not for others, by consensus and agreement. However, there can be no guarantee that such equivalence will be long-lasting. This is more or less the view of Theo Hermans, who, following Gideon Toury in a systemic approach to translation, agrees that norms give objective substance to equivalence. “In his view, if a text is accepted as a translation, it follows axiomatically that the relation of equivalence between the translation and its original obtains; norms determine the concrete shape of that equivalence relation in specific instances.”⁴⁷ In this sense all translations would be “functional equivalents” of their originals as long as the consumers or publishers perceive them as such.

Nida is not alone among theorists who define translation in terms of equivalence relations;⁴⁸ it remains a central concept in translation theory. However, in the aftermath of criticisms of Nida’s brand of equivalence, many theorists have ostensibly moved away from it⁴⁹ to more functional, negotiated, target-audience centered ideals of translation like Skopos theory.⁵⁰ Some theorists like Mona Baker use the notion of equivalence “for the sake of convenience—because most translators are used to it rather than

because it has any theoretical status.”⁵¹ Others reject the theoretical ideal of equivalence, claiming it is either irrelevant or damaging to theoretical reflection on translation. Mary Snell-Hornby, for example, rejects equivalence as “an illusion of symmetry between languages which hardly exists beyond the level of vague approximations and which distorts the basic problems of translation.”⁵² For many translators, the goal of semantic equivalence forever recedes from the realm of attainability, although it may for a time serve as an impetus for hard work. As Miguel de Unamuno so eloquently said in the introduction to J. E. Crawford Fitch’s English translation of his *Tragic Sense of Life*, “an idea does not pass from one language to another without change.”⁵³ Thus, equivalence is variously regarded as a necessary condition for translation, an obstacle to progress in translation studies, or a useful category for describing translations.

Whatever the vicious distractions or sterling virtues engendered by the ideal of equivalence in various paradigms of translation theory, Christian theology and mission need not be dependent on Nida’s theoretical formulation of it. At the same time, it should be recognized that the practical, audience focus of dynamic/functional equivalence theorists is an enduring strength of this approach. A more fruitful idea for mission is to consider, following Barth, the function of Scripture as God’s word written in its witness to the Word become flesh. That witness is one, not least, of correspondence. Insofar as Scripture translations bear witness to the Word who is full of grace and truth, they may be equivalent in value and principally derive their value from the effectiveness of that witnessing function. But this notion of equivalence is strictly theological and ecclesial. Faithfulness in translation, then, is best judged as faithful witness in such audience-related terms. A Bible translation, in these terms, functions properly as an extension of the canonical, liturgical life of the church. Certainly, however, many other types of Bible translation are possible, for Christians do not own the Bible. However, Christians do well to consider the Scriptures as a sophisticated gift of grace to the church to introduce people to the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ by helping “to bring them to faith, to make them wise for salvation, to make them struggle with awkward questions about violence and the poor, to comfort those in sorrow, and to nourish hope for the redemption of the world.”⁵⁴ These functions will be accomplished best in any population by a variety of types of translations in the service of the church.

Yancy Smith is a former church planter for Churches of Christ in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He later planted Emmanuel Fellowship Church in Sweetwater, Texas. He has been a Bible translation consultant for 15 years and currently is the Senior Director, Global Translation Services for Bible League International. He was the primary consultant for the easy-to-read translation into Spanish: *La Palabra de Dios para Todos*. He is married to Lanette Smith and they have four children: Jennifer, Heather, Matthew, and Kara. Yancy is an elder at Christ Fellowship Church, Fort Worth, a member of the Antioch International Movement of Churches. He holds an MA in New Testament from Abilene Christian University and a PhD in Biblical Interpretation from Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University.

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¹ Jordan Monson, "A Fun Look at a Strange Bible Translation," *Missions Untold*, <http://missionsuntold.com/a-fun-look-at-a-strange-bible-translation>.

² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 26.

³ Ibid. See also Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, American Society of Missiology Series 13 (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 174–75.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 1993), 181.

⁵ "Linguistic hospitality, therefore, is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling." Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan, *Thinking in Action*, Kindle ed. (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2006), Kindle loc. 219.

⁶ Vicente L. Rafael, "Targeting Translation: Counterinsurgency and the Weaponization of Language," *Social Text* 30, no. 4 (2012): 55–80. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, "Translations," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 67. Commenting on translation during the Roman imperial period Nietzsche says: "Indeed, translation was a form of conquest."

⁷ From ancient times; see Jerome, *Letter to Pammachius*, in Venuti, 21–30.

⁸ Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation, Helps for Translators* 8 (New York: American Bible Society, 1974), 103–19.

⁹ Charles H. Kraft and Marguerite G. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 25th Anniversary Kindle ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), Kindle locs. 1503–2643. See Dave Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), for a clearly written explanation of how both so-called "literal" and "free" or "dynamic equivalence" translations make many more of such adjustments than is commonly supposed.

¹⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating," in Venuti, 43–63.

¹¹ Adapted from Isidore Epstein, ed., *Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Kiddushin*, Student Manual/Study Guide ed., trans. H. Freedman (Brooklyn: Soncino Press, 1966), b. Qiddushin 49a. "Our translation" refers to the Aramaic Targum Onkelos.

¹² Quite a few biblical authors and characters express surprise that humans saw God without dying or fear that they would die because of seeing God; see Gen 32:31, and particularly Exod 24:10–11; Judg 6:22–23; Judg 13:22; Isa 6:1–5; also perhaps Gen 16:13, according to a likely emendation (viz., "So she named the LORD who spoke to her, 'El-roi'; for she said, 'I have seen God and remained alive after seeing him.'") suggested by Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Genesis und Exodus*, vol. 1 of *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel: Textkritisches, Sprachliches und Sachliches* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908), 64–65. It did not seem obvious to us that John's denial might be referring to this well-known Jewish conundrum of translation in Exod 24:10: "and they saw the God of Israel." The translation of this verse was discussed in the medieval *Tosafot* of b. Qiddushin 49a (opposite Rashi's commentary on the Babylonian Talmud) and, given John's denial, much

earlier. From the Rabbinic point of view, the literal rendering “they saw the God of Israel” conveys a lie, as God cannot be seen, while the added words in the rendering “they saw the angel of the God of Israel” (as in the Targum) involves a blasphemy. For the important discussion of Exod 24:9–11 in Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, see Michelle Levine, “Maimonides’ Philosophical Exegesis of the Nobles’ Vision (Exodus 24): A Guide for the Pursuit of Knowledge,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 11 (2002–2003): 61–106. John’s denial is part of an increasing discomfort with this degree of anthropomorphism. For example, the LXX of Exod 24:11, “καὶ τῶν ἐπιλέκτων τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ οὐ διεφώνησεν οὐδὲ εἷς· καὶ ὤφθησαν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἔφαγον καὶ ἔπινον.” “And of the chosen of Israel there was not even one missing, and they were seen in the presence of God and ate and drank.” The LXX of 24:10a shows a similar trait. Instead of beholding the “God of Israel,” the elders “καὶ εἶδον τὸν τόπον, οὗ εἰστήκει ἐκεῖ ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ,” seeing only “the place where the God of Israel stood.” But John’s denial highlights the anthropomorphism of the incarnation. See also, Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹³ E.g., “The translation model regards culture somewhat positively but focuses more on the faithful transmission of the gospel message. It therefore regards culture as a means, as a vehicle of transmission, rather than something good and revelatory in itself.” Stephen B. Bevans, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, American Society of Missiology Series 30, Kindle ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), Kindle locs. 1432–35. See Kraft, Kindle loc. 2643: “The forms of culture are (like water pipes) important not for their own sake but for the sake of that which they convey.”

¹⁴ See Kraft, Kindle locs. 6761–7266.

¹⁵ Bevans, Kindle locs. 1463–65.

¹⁶ Kraft, Kindle loc. 6279.

¹⁷ Notice the posturing between dynamic and formal equivalence in the introduction to the English Standard Version: ESV Bible, “Preface to the English Standard Version,” About, <http://about.esvbible.org/about/preface>.

¹⁸ Walls, 27.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 27–28.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Ibid., 29.

²³ Ibid. This is the ancient Christian practice of the Rule of Christ in Matthew 18 known as “binding and loosing” using “discernment.” See John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World*, Kindle ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2001), Kindle locs. 164–365.

²⁴ Walls, 34–35. This is not to say that *mar* (Aramaic for Lord) was not previously used for Christ, but that both *mar* and *kyrios* take on significant freight outside of Jewish circles. The picture in Luke-Acts is considerably more complex than Walls details at this point, but it is well taken that the message of Jesus as Lord is particularly significant in the Gentile mission. Cf. C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 218. The phrase found in Acts 11:20 is characteristic of Luke’s narrative of the risen Lord (Luke 24:3; Acts 1:21; 4:33; 8:16; 11:17, 20; 15:11; 16:31; 19:5, 13, 17; 20:24, 35; 21:13; 28:31).

[25](#) See Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990), 137–56.

[26](#) Eugene A. Nida, *Bible Translating: An Analysis of Principles and Procedures, with Special Reference to Aboriginal Languages* (New York: American Bible Society, 1947), 12–13; Nida and Taber, 14, 22–24.

[27](#) Nida, *Bible Translating*, 12.

[28](#) Nida and Taber, 57–98.

[29](#) See Chaïm Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric: Philosophy*, trans. William Kluback (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 50–51, an operation known as “liaison” or “thickening” that essentially borrows the assumed authority from one discourse and applies it to another surreptitiously or unconsciously.

[30](#) See Roland Boer, “The Dynamic Equivalence Caper,” in *Ideology, Culture, and Translation*, ed. Scott S. Elliott and Roland Boer, *Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies* 69 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 13–23.

[31](#) See J. J. M. Roberts, “An Evaluation of the NRSV: Demystifying Bible Translation,” *Insights: A Journal of the Faculty of Austin Seminary* 108, no. 2 (1993): 25–36, <http://bible-researcher.com/roberts1.html>.

[32](#) Lyonell Zogbo, “Bible, Jewish and Christian,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, ed. Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 24.

[33](#) Anthony Pym, *Exploring Translation Theories* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 6.

[34](#) *Ibid.*, 26.

[35](#) Ernst Wendland, “Exploring Translation Theories—A Review from the Perspective of Bible Translation,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 38, no. 2 (2012): 95, <http://wendlandsite.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/wendland-jnsl-38-2-nr2.pdf>.

[36](#) Brunn, 130.

[37](#) Ricoeur, 33.

[38](#) Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 2.15.22.

[39](#) Jerome, *Letter to Pammachius*, in Venuti, 23.

[40](#) According to Jerome, *To Pammachius on the Best Method of Translating* 5, in *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 6 of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1893), 291, <http://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.LVII.html>.

[41](#) Jerome, *Letter to Pammachius*, in Venuti, 25:

Let us give another example of the same sort from Zechariah, which John the Evangelist takes from the Hebrew truth: “They will gaze upon him whom they have pierced” [John 19:37]. For this the Septuagint reads: “They will look upon me, because they have mocked me,” which the Latin version translates

[interpretati] as “And they will gaze upon me because of those things they have mocked” or “insulted.” The Evangelist, the Septuagint, and our Latin translation of Zechariah each differ, yet the various modes of expression unite in one spirit.

Here, the Latin implies more of a dynamic relationship: *spiritus unitate concordat*, i.e., “they harmonize together in the unity of the Spirit.”

[42](#) William A. Smalley, *Translation as Mission: Bible Translation in the Modern Missionary Movement. The Modern Mission Era, 1792–1992*. (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1991), 21–38.

[43](#) Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–207.

[44](#) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 259.

[45](#) On the notion of mimicry as resistance in the postcolonial situation, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 1994), 85.

[46](#) See Stefano Arduini and Robert Hodgson, eds., *Similarity and Difference in Translation: Proceedings of the International Conference on Similarity and Translation* (New York: Guaraldi, 2004).

[47](#) Theo Hermans, “Norms of Translation,” in *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, ed. Carol A. Chapelle (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013),
http://researchschool.org/documents/Hermans_Norms%20of%20Trl.pdf.

[48](#) Among others, see J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics, Language and Language Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965); Gideon Toury, *In Search of a Theory of Translation, Meaning and Art 2* (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics & Semiotics, 1980); Pym, 6.

[49](#) Dorothy Kenny, “Equivalence,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 94.

[50](#) For an accessible introduction to functional translation theory and practice, see Christiane Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained, Translation Theories Explained 1* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997).

[51](#) Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2–6.

[52](#) Mary Snell-Hornby, *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach* (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1988), 22.

[53](#) Miguel de Unamuno, author’s preface to *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (New York: Cosmo Publishers, 1953).

[54](#) William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

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