

Modern Translations

Their Use and Abuse

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the English Revised Version (1885), the King James Version, or are David Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

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Modern Translations—Their Use and Abuse

All who believe the Scriptures to be the Word of God will, presumably, welcome every help that translators can give towards a full and exact understanding of what God has caused to be written. Nowadays, however, there is such a wealth of modern translations that we may be in danger of becoming confused, rather than helped, if we do not understand a thing or two about translations.

First of all, there are translations and translations, some good, some not so good. Then again, some translators aim at producing a rendering that is as literal and faithful to the original as possible. Others try by means of paraphrase and interpretation to convey some of the warmth, colour and force of the original, which cannot always be done by a literal translation. Some translations have followed the Hebrew and Greek so literally and without regard for the idioms of the different languages concerned, that the result can scarcely be called English. Others have allowed themselves such freedom, that in places they are positively incorrect. Mercifully most translations lie somewhere between these two extremes, and a judicious use of them by those who have their senses exercised to discern between good and evil, can be most profitable.

But, facing facts, we must admit that not all have their senses so exercised. New converts cannot be expected to have more than a hazy notion of Biblical doctrine. Moreover, many churches have no one among them with an expert knowledge of the original languages to whom they could appeal for decision in places where translations disagree. Such nevertheless will need clear, authoritative statements of doctrine and they may well wonder which translation or translations they can for all general purposes rely upon as court of appeal. For this purpose they could do no better than to take the R.V., compared, if desired, with the A.V. These two versions keep as far as possible from both extremes, and being the work of committees, they are less subject to the bias and prejudice that creeps into the work of individual translation.

Certainly doctrine is best learned from the R.V. rather than from free translations or paraphrases; and any 'new light' that a reader may think he has discovered from a free translation should be checked in the light of the stricter rendering of the R.V.

It is unfortunately the fact that some people are confused by the use of any other version than the A.V. It would greatly help if elders saw to it that each generation in their assemblies were taught the elementary facts about how we got the Bible, and why more than one translation has been necessary. At the same time, those who have greater knowledge will, if they are spiritual, use their knowledge discreetly to encourage and confirm the faith of their fellow-believers, and not confuse and discourage them by parading a show of technical learning.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.