

The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation

by Leland Ryken

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The author, Professor of English at Wheaton College, analyzes dynamic equivalence (thought-for-thought) translations which currently dominate the Bible market and concludes that most of the new translations represent a dumbing-down and loss of richness from the original language behind the text. (Among the more popular dynamic-equivalence translations are the NIV, CEV, NLT, NEB, and *The Message*.)

This is not the typical soapbox-mounted ax-grinding presentation of a zealot who is out to champion one particular translation at the expense of all others. Rather, it is the fairly reasoned and carefully presented work of a man who is well-schooled in the field of literature and writing.

While upholding the inspiration and inerrancy of the Biblical text, the author recognizes that stylistically the text shares attributes in common with other great works of literature. Why then, if scholars would not dare pass off a wholesale modification of Shakespeare as a legitimate rendering of his work, is this routinely deemed to be acceptable by popular thought-for-thought translations of the Word of God?

The author identifies important attributes of literature and illustrates how dynamic translations embrace principles which are inherently opposed to preserving these attributes. The result is predictable: popular Bible versions which are poorer as measured by standards of both accuracy and literary quality. This is not just theory—Leland offers many specific examples taken from various thought-for-thought translations to prove his point.

For this reviewer, the most telling sections of the book were parts two and three. Part two, subtitled “*Common Fallacies of Translation*” examines the assumptions which dynamic-equivalence translations make in order to justify their movement away from the actual words of the underlying text. The author shows that these assumptions are at best highly questionable and generally contribute to the self-fulfilling demise of Bible understanding by modern readership. Part three, subtitled “*Theological, Ethical, and Hermeneutical Issues*” will be of great interest to preachers and teachers of God's word. Although Leland applauds the well-meaning intentions of the dynamic-equivalence translators, he notes that these translations take great liberties with the meaning of the text. Leland shows that although dynamic-equivalence translators profess a *belief* in verbal inspiration (the very *words* in the original are those God intended), the outcome of their work undermines this foundational principle. In their readiness to move away from the actual words of the original, they unavoidably divorce the text from the author's intended meaning—thereby distorting the word of God and rendering verbal inspiration of little consequence in their work.

Probably the most troubling aspect of dynamic-equivalence translations is that they muddy the water by combining *interpretation* with *translation* in ways that a reader of

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these translations can never know when ambiguity in the original text has been arbitrarily settled by the translation committee in a way which completely hides other valid interpretive options from the reader. In short, dynamic-equivalence translations place an additional layer of *interpretation* between the reader and the actual Word of God.

These translations are to be avoided, not merely because they are new or novel, but because they take liberties with the Word of God which reflect a cavalier view of verbal inspiration and demean the richness of the underlying text. Leland argues that the loss is not just one of precision, but also of literary quality thereby contributing to a loss of appreciation for this magnificent communication of God to man.

We believe Leland's even-handed analysis and careful presentation of the subject is unanswerable, exposing these translations for what they are: inadequate representations--in some cases even *distortions*--of God's Holy Word. By reading this book, you will obtain a much clearer understanding of why these translations should be avoided by those who are serious about learning and teaching God's Word.

Review by [Tony Garland](#) of www.SpiritAndTruth.org.