
The Spiritual Practice of Biblical Translation

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This article is in honor of May Persaud on her retirement from Wartburg Theological Seminary. May is one of the most gifted language teachers it has been my privilege to know. In her teaching, May moved beyond exegetical and hermeneutical fundamentals to encourage students to consider the faith claims of the text in the context of their own lives and vocations. Many students shared with me how their personal faith was deepened through the experience of learning biblical languages with May Persaud. Such conversations encouraged me to explore for myself the idea of biblical translation as a spiritual practice. This article shares some reflections on this spiritual practice in hopes that it encourages others to consider a variation of biblical translation as an unexpected and meaningful spiritual practice that may deepen one's faith and help one draw closer to God.

Translation as a spiritual practice

In some ways, translation can be viewed in relation to the *lectio divina*. When translating, one must slow down and dwell in the scriptural text. And one recognizes that scripture is also dwelling in us. Translation reminds us we are engaging the biblical world and that we are exploring different cultures and worldviews. Words may have different meanings than common English connotations. One enters this spiritual practice accepting that through the Holy Spirit one may be challenged and changed by this encounter with the living God.

We take clues from the Hebrew language. Hebrew is the biblical language with which I have the most facility. The language itself has characteristics that aid in interpreting and understanding the text's faith claims. Some of these characteristics include multiple meanings, ambiguities, the use of metaphorical language, intertextuality, repetition, and structure. These characteristics are not always found in every text, yet when present provide important interpretive insights.

Many Hebrew words have multiple meanings and nuances. The word *kanaph* means wing or extremity, such as the skirt of a garment and is used in Deuteronomy to mean sexual intercourse.¹ Boaz uses this word when asking for God's blessing and protection on Ruth, that she dwell under God's wing (*kanaph*) (Ruth

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2:12).² In Ruth 3:9 Ruth asks Boaz to spread his cloak (*kanaph*) over her suggesting that he become God's blessing and protection to her. This use of *kanaph* also hints at the sexual laws of Deuteronomy providing a delightful double entendre as an invitation to intercourse.

Multiple meanings and nuances can lead to ambiguities which invite the reader to slow down, explore possibilities, and be open to new visions. In Jonah 3:4, Jonah announces that in forty days Nineveh will be overthrown (*nehpāket*). Another form of this verb is used of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and most people initially see Jonah's statement as a prophecy of similar destruction. Yet, this root also means to turn oneself aside or away from something, to change. There is such a change in the overturning of social order and customs when the king follows the lead of his people and all of Nineveh repents and turns from their evil ways (Jonah 3:10). Nineveh is overthrown without being destroyed.

Another characteristic of biblical Hebrew is the use of metaphorical language. Such language is meant to evoke multiple images and ideas, engaging the reader in creating meanings. In Psalm 1 the righteous are compared to a tree which may evoke meanings

1. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/3671.htm>; Deut 22:30; 27:20. All biblical references are to the NRSV.

2. All biblical references are to the NRSV.

of rootedness, being alive, living for others and in community, strength and flexibility, purpose, and fruitfulness. The wicked are compared to chaff, the dry, dead, irritating husk of grains that serve no purpose, and are easily driven away.

Intertextuality, how different texts refer to or echo each other, is another feature of biblical Hebrew. Intertextuality invites the reader to contrast and compare these texts and ponder what new insights are gained by reading them together. For example, Jer 17:5-8 shares similar themes and imagery with Psalm 1. The focus, however, is on where people put their trust. What might the thinking about trust add to an interpretation of Psalm 1?

Repetition, often with a progression, emphasizes main points in the biblical text. Biblical repetition often uses similar themes, ideas, and images rather than exact language. Structure can also signify importance in a text. Usually what is important comes first in the text. There may be repetitions at the beginning and end of the texts and crucial pivots of meaning in the middle of the text. Repetition and structure are important in Ps 1:1.³

All the characteristics of biblical Hebrew encourage the reader to slow down, to dwell in the text, to imagine possibilities, to explore options and resist searching for one absolute meaning. It is a way of discovering multiple truths in a text, while also acknowledging there may be meanings beyond our understanding.

Translating Psalm 1:1-2 as a spiritual practice⁴

Praying the psalms has long been a spiritual practice of the church. It is a part of my own spiritual practice; the psalms have become the focus of my translation as a spiritual practice.

The method is as follows.

1. Read the text in English.
2. Dwell in each verse for several minutes.
3. Make a list of the questions that come to mind. Since some questions are based on the connotations of English words, it is important to check the nuances and connotations of the Hebrew words.
4. Open Biblehub and go to the text.
5. Click on the interlinear tab. The interlinear tab allows for easier word study searches.
6. Search for the range of meanings of a word using the BDB lexicon tab.
7. Search the range of uses using both Strong's and Englishman's concordances.⁵ Focus on texts from the same biblical book (e.g., Psalms) or same genre (prophetic, wisdom, torah).
8. Review initial thoughts and questions based on new insights

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all further biblical references are from the book of Psalms.

4. The first two verses of Psalm 1 are enough to demonstrate the process of this spiritual practice.

5. There are many YouTube videos which demonstrate how to use Biblehub to do word studies.

gained from the translation work. What is one learning about God, oneself, and one's faith walk with God? I will use Psalm 1 as an example of one way such a practice might work.

Psalm 1:1

"Happy are those who don't follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers."

Psalm 1 is a traditional wisdom psalm with a perspective of two different pathways a person may follow: the path of righteousness and the path of wickedness. It is also persuasive literature, seeking to convince the reader to choose the path of righteousness.

Psalm 1 begins with the word *'ašrê*⁶ which means happy or blessed. A more typical word for blessed is *barak*; the use of *'ašrê* is unusual. Questions that arise include: Why is this word meaning happy, happiness used? Is there a difference between being happy and being blessed? Can someone bless themselves or are blessings primarily mediated through another? What about happiness? Is happiness an inner quality or is it grounded in exterior circumstances? What makes one happy? Most of my initial default answers around happiness are around secular things. Is this an indication of needing to attend to my faith life more?

'ašrê is used frequently in the psalms. Some of the ambiguity between happiness and blessing is maintained. One who is happy has many sons (127:5), many of God's blessings (144:15), and eat of the fruit of their labor (128:2). *'ašrê* also has a sense of right acts. The happy one considers the poor (41:1) and observes justice (106:3). There is a powerful sense of relationship with God. Happy are those who have God as their refuge (2:11), help and hope (146:5), strength (84:5), trust (40:4), and live in God's house (65:4, 84:4). And several psalms list happy people as those who study God's teachings and ways.⁷

What is learned from this word study? Certainly, the focus is much more religious than initial ponderings. A clear focus is on a relationship with God that implies closeness and dependency. The language of hope, help, refuge, and trust suggests shelter, protection, and complete reliance upon God. For me, it implies confidence that a strong relationship with God may allow one to weather life's trials and tribulations and face life and the future with assurance of God's presence and promises. An initial thought of happiness as joy becomes more a feeling of peace and contentment. The use of *'ašrê* hints that one way of maintaining that relationship is through the study of God's word. This is developed more in verse two.

One other insight from the word study of *'ašrê* is the connection of happiness to right/righteous acts, such as considering the poor and doing justice. Initial thoughts had focused on the emotional, psychological aspects of the word happiness. What actions make me feel happy? Are they righteous actions? Word studies may not always supply simple answers, rather they may

6. Hebrew words in this paper will follow the form of the word used in the interlinear text and not its lexical root.

7. For example, Psalm 94:12, 119:1, 119:2; 128:1.

open different avenues of reflection and thought.

In verse one, happiness is framed in a series of negatives. One does not follow the advice of the wicked, take the path of the sinners, nor sit with the scoffers. Psalm 40:4 also uses a negative to indicate happiness. “Happy are those who make the Lord their trust and don’t turn to the proud or defiant.” I typically associate happiness with positive things. Here it appears happiness is to avoid certain types of people and their ways of life. What might that mean?

The series of negatives around people and their ways of life is framed using a three-fold repetition and structure. Repetitions are around movement, the manner of life, and the people to avoid as seen in the chart below. The structure emphasizes not following the advice of the wicked.

MOVEMENT	WAY OF LIFE	PERSON
Follow (Walk)	Advice	Wicked
Tread (Stand)	Path	Sinners
Sit (Dwell)	Seat	Scoffers

The ways of life to be avoided begin with a repetition of movement in this text from walking to standing to sitting. Initially, this repetition develops movement beginning from activity to stationary to sedentary. What might this mean? Often repetition in Hebrew poetry is used to develop and expand earlier phrases. *Hālāk* (follow, walk) often has a figurative sense of walking in someone’s ways, walking with another, and walking away from God.⁸ Walking suggests a way of life that is habitual and can be positive or negative depending on which way of life is being followed.

ʾamad (stand), can mean to take a stand, to stand for something, identifying with something.⁹ To stand with and for sinners and sin really conveys a strong image of those rebelling against God. *Yāšab* (sit/dwell) has a sense of remaining and dwelling with someone.¹⁰ These verbs are not just moving from active to stationary but convey patterns of life that has one identifying and remaining with people who have turned away from God. The words are suggestive of a sense of inertia, accommodation, perhaps permanence, which are only somewhat suggested in English.

The movement from walking to sitting/dwelling suggests the starting of a way of life that leads away from God to becoming quite settled and habitually used to such a way of life and beginning to ponder, where have I been moving away from God in my life? Am I so accustomed to such movement I do not even realize that I am missing key aspects of my relationship with God? What excuses do I make for neglecting my relationship with God?

There is also a three-fold pattern of advice, way, and seats connected to the motions and the people involved. “Advice” (*ba’āṣat*) moves beyond the sense of counsel to include the ideas of plans,

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designs, and purposes.¹¹ There are contrasts between God’s plans which last forever, and the nations’ plans which God destroys (33:10-11). Also, God’s people are seen as rebellious in their plans (106:43) and spurn God’s advice (107:11). Advice (*ba’āṣat*) implies not just advice but taking advice that moves forward to a plan of action. The advice of the wicked goes against God’s advice.

“Way” has the sense of a course of life and actions as well as moral character, often in a negative sense.¹² The “seat,” *ūbāmōwōšab*, has both a sense of company, often with a group who gather and make judgments, and of a dwelling place.¹³ The intensification moves from listening to people, to a way of life that eventually ends with keeping company with, spending time with a group of perhaps like-minded people. Not bad, until one sees the description of the people involved.

I begin to ponder—whose advice do I seek? Whose way of life do I attempt to model? Whose company do I keep? How do these people help form and shape me? How intentional am I in whom I select as friends and mentors? How do I connect their influences with previous ideas of happiness?

A third repetition is the repetition of the type of people to be avoided as the text moves from the wicked (*rāšā’im*) to sinners (*haṭṭā’im*) to scoffers (*leṣim*).

The word “wicked” includes the meaning of a criminal or one who is guilty of hostility to God or guilty of sin.¹⁴ In the psalms the wicked do evil (7:9) and persecute the poor (10:2). They will face God’s judgment and destruction and be sent to Sheol (9:5, 17:13, 9:17). *Rāšā’im* is a strong word used of those who work against God’s will. It is in a place of emphasis for the three words used to describe people in verse one.

Sinners (*haṭṭā’im*) are offenders, those exposed to condemnation.¹⁵ Sinners may be destroyed (26:9, 104:35), but they can also be instructed in God’s ways and return to God (25:8, 51:13). This term does not seem to be as intense as wicked.

The term scoffers (*leṣim*) has the sense of scorn¹⁶ and is often

8. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/1980.htm>

9. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/5975.htm>

10. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/3427.htm>

11. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/6098.htm>

12. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/1870.htm>

13. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/4186.htm>

14. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/7563.htm>

15. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/2400.htm>

16. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/3887.htm>

translated as derision, ridicule, mockery, and sneering.¹⁷ The term is primarily used in Proverbs where scoffers do not listen to rebuke (Prov 13:1, 15:12) and act with arrogant pride (Prov 21:24). A scoffer is an abomination to all (Prov 24:9) and interestingly Prov 22:10 claims that “drive out a scoffer and strife goes out; quarreling and abuse will cease.” The term scoffer does not seem to be as bad as the wicked and sinners. Is there subtlety around the word scorn that is not readily apparent? What makes scoffing/scorning to be bad enough to be included in this verse?

The psalmist is linking happiness to avoiding certain people and their ways of living. There are people who can make one feel worse or depressed. Addicts are often encouraged to not go back to social situations and friends that might encourage them to use again. What might such an avoidance of certain types of people mean?

The relationship between happiness and avoiding certain types of people seems more a rhetorical move than a clear correlation. If happiness is about a close, trusting relationship with God, what does that imply for a relationship with God and a relationship with the people the psalmist wants to label as sinners and wicked? On the one hand, the language of wicked and sinner is about their relationship with God. The movement language suggests a continuing pattern of turning away from God. Being with such people will not provide happiness.

Yet are these not some of the people Jesus sought out and with whom he ate? Is personal happiness such an ultimate goal that one must shun some people, especially those to whom Jesus reached out? Furthermore, are there people who are only wicked and sinners? Are there not times when I am the wicked and sinful one? How may my own advice and actions lead people away from God?

Psalm 1:2

“but their delight is in the law¹⁸ of the LORD and on (God’s) law they meditate day and night.”

Initial insights include that “delight” in verse two parallels “happy” in verse one. Initial meanings of delight include joy and pleasure. The Hebrew *’āšrē* was shown to relate strongly to a relationship with God. Is a similar relationship with God implied by delight?

Hēpsōw has the meanings of delight, pleasure, desire, and longing.¹⁹ The Hebrew connotations of desire and longing are more intense than initial meanings of delight. This delight is not a surface fancy but deeply engages the person. Psalm 111:2 is the closest parallel to Psalm 1:2 with the works of the Lord being studied by those who delight in them.

Humans find delight, pleasure, desire, and longing in God’s teaching, God’s works, and God’s wisdom. *Hēpsōw* implies another level of relationship with God. How does one know God?

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Through God’s teachings and works. One part of a relationship is engaging with the other’s speech and activities. The term “desire” suggests such an engagement as well as a continuing desire and longing for such engagement.

New questions based on this word study include: When in my faith life have I felt such delight and desire for God’s teachings? When has my study of God’s teachings seemed more routine? What have been the differences in these feelings?

Knowing this work is meant to be persuasive, there is no need to berate oneself for not always feeling a “delight” when studying God’s word. This spiritual practice of Bible translation helps bring professional work and personal faith closer together. Yet, verse two is a good reminder to ask what my expectations are when studying God’s word.

A new question arises. Am I genuinely concerned about happiness and delight? Each day the news brings awareness of violence, hatred, division, genocide, and catastrophes. I realize as I engage this psalm I am looking more for hope than happiness. Delight in meditating on God’s teachings takes a different meaning for me.

Sometimes, there is not much to be hopeful about in the world. Thoughts and prayers are typical responses to human and natural disasters and seem inadequate. Even well-intended actions often miss the mark.

One of my key faith acknowledgements is that true hope can only be found in God. God’s word constantly reminds us of who God is, what God has done in the past, and that God is acting in our world today. God’s word also brings a call to act in the world, such as the claim of Micah 6:8 and to be witness to God’s rule. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a Gospel of hope. The voices of the world surround us 24/7. The psalmist is suggesting that God’s word surrounding us 24/7 (day and night) provides a distinct perspective, one that can bring delight and hope.

But what does it mean to meditate? Is it a quiet, solitary practice of deep reflection, pondering, even emptying one’s mind to be open to new insights? Encouraged to avoid the wicked, sinners, and scoffers, am I now to study God’s teachings alone?

Yehgeh, the word used in v. 2 for meditate has some unusual definitions, including moan, growl, utter, speak, muse. The lexicon

17. <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Psalm%20119%3A51>

18. The word Torah means instruction/teaching, not Law as Lutherans understand Law/Gospel.

19. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/2656.htm>

also suggests soliloquize, meditate, muse.²⁰ In the psalms people meditate on God's work and teachings.²¹ Joshua 1:8 is a close parallel to Psalm 1:2. The Lord commands Joshua to meditate on the Torah day and night. If Joshua acts according to the Torah he will prosper and succeed. The emphasis on meditating on God's works and teachings reinforces the meanings and uses of delighting in God's works and teachings.

Conclusion

This word study has challenged an initial understanding of meditation. It does not necessarily imply, while not precluding quiet or solitary exercise. Meditation could be a two-step process. The first step would be studying and dwelling in God's word, either individually or in a group. The second step could be one of speech and proclamation to others so that God's gracious word of hope is addressed to a broken world in need of healing.

Translation can be a spiritual practice drawing one closer to God and deepening one's faith. The method proposed here does not allow for a quick walk-through biblical texts but encourages one to dwell deeply in God's word. It may take a form similar to the Ignatian review of one's day or life.

It is with great appreciation and thankfulness that I dedicate this paper to May Persaud, whose teaching of biblical languages has deepened the faith lives and vocations of many of her students.

20. These definitions are all in the Qal root. It is not a variant root stem that leads to this peculiar set of definitions.

21. Psalms 63:7, 77:13, 143:5.

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