

## **FOUND IN TRANSLATION: PARSING AND APPRECIATING DIFFICULT TEXTS**

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### **Skills and strategies under development**

#### **Language Arts**

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
2. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.
3. Uses skills and strategies to read a variety of literary texts.
4. Uses general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts.
5. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

#### **Behavioral Studies**

6. Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior.
7. Understands that interactions among learning, inheritance, and physical development affect human behavior.

#### **Arts and Communication**

8. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication.

#### **Life Skills: Working With Others**

9. Contributes to the overall effort of a group.
10. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills.

### **Overview**

What are the limitations of translations? When and why is archaic or difficult language worth reading? In this lesson, students examine the language of the King James Bible by comparing it with two popular translations as a means of discussing why difficult texts are worth reading in their original language. You may wish to clarify for students that this activity involves looking at the Bible as literature, and as part of our culture, rather than for preaching or advancing any one religion.

### **Materials**

Computers with Internet access; copies of the handout «Three Versions of the Book of Genesis»; and copies of texts and summaries of those texts from SparkNotes (<http://www.sparknotes.com/>) or the like.

## **Section 1: In-class Activities**

### **1. Warm-Up**

Give students this list of phrases from the King James Bible (without revealing their origin):

- sour grapes
- fatted calf
- salt of the earth
- drop in a bucket
- skin of one’s teeth
- apple of one’s eye
- girded loins
- feet of clay
- pearls before swine
- fly in the ointment
- fight the good fight
- eat, drink and be merry

Ask students if they know the source of these phrases. Once you have established that they all come from the King James Bible, ask the following questions:

- Is it surprising to you that all of these phrases come from the Bible? Why or why not?
- What do you tend to think about when you think of the language of the Bible?
- What does it say about the Bible and its role in our language and culture that these phrases are still in common use?

For a bit of fun to end the warm-up, assign pairs to «translate» one of the phrases above into contemporary English/ their native language. Is there a contemporary equivalent? Or is the «oldie, the goodie» in this case? If pairs come up with a successful translation, ask the class to compare it to the original. Is anything lost in the translation? Gained? If so, what?

1. **Reading and discussion:** In the Week in Review article «Why the King James Bible Endures», Charles McGrath examines the lasting power and beauty of the language of the King James Bible.

### **Why the King James Bible Endures**

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/weekinreview/24mcgrath.html?\\_r=1&gwh=836B0E7C098E20F3382347AC9A72551B](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/weekinreview/24mcgrath.html?_r=1&gwh=836B0E7C098E20F3382347AC9A72551B)

By CHARLES McGRATH

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## **Found in Translation: Parsing and Appreciating Difficult Texts**

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The King James Bible, which was first published 400 years ago next month, may be the single best thing ever accomplished by a committee. The Bible was the work of 54 scholars and clergymen who met over seven years in six nine-man subcommittees, called «companies». In a preface to the new Bible, Miles Smith, one of the translators and a man so impatient that he once walked out of a boring sermon and went to the pub, wrote that anything new inevitably «endured many a storm of gainsaying, or opposition». So there must have been disputes – shouting; table pounding; high-ruffed, black-gowned clergymen folding their arms and stomping out of the room – but there is no record of them. And the finished text shows none of the PowerPoint insipidness we associate with committee-speak or with later group translations like the 1961 New English Bible, which T.S. Eliot said did not even rise to «dignified mediocrity». Far from bland, the King James Bible is one of the great masterpieces of English prose.

The issue of how, or even whether, to translate sacred texts was a fraught one in those days, often with political as well as religious overtones, and it still is. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, recently decided to retranslate the missal used at Mass to make it more formal and less conversational. Critics have complained that the new text is awkward and archaic, while its defenders (some of whom probably still prefer the Mass in Latin) insist that's just the point – that language a little out of the ordinary is more devotional and inspiring. No one would ever say that the King James Bible is an easy read. And yet its very oddness is part of its power.

From the start, the King James Bible was intended to be not a literary creation but rather a political and theological compromise between the established church and the growing Puritan movement. What the king cared about was clarity, simplicity, doctrinal orthodoxy. The translators worked hard on that, going back to the original Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, and yet they also spent a lot of time tweaking the English text in the interest of euphony and musicality. Time and again the language seems to slip almost unconsciously into iambic pentameter – this was the age of Shakespeare, commentators are always reminding us – and right from the beginning the translators embraced the principles of repetition and the dramatic pause: «In the beginning God created the Heauen, and the Earth. And the earth was without forme, and voyd, and darkenesse was vpon the face of the deepe: and the Spirit of God mooued vpon the face of the waters».

The influence of the King James Bible is so great that the list of idioms from it that have slipped into everyday speech, taking such deep root that we use them all the time without any awareness of their biblical origin, is practically endless: sour grapes; fatted calf; salt of the earth; drop in a bucket; skin of one's teeth; apple of one's eye; girded loins; feet of clay;

## Found in Translation: Parsing and Appreciating Difficult Texts

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whited sepulchers; filthy lucre; pearls before swine; fly in the ointment; fight the good fight; eat, drink and be merry.

But what we also love about this Bible is its strangeness – its weird punctuation, odd pronouns (as in «Our Father, which art in heaven»), all those verbs that end in «eth»: «In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth vp; in the euening it is cut downe, and withereth». As Robert Alter has demonstrated in his startling and revealing translations of the Psalms and the Pentateuch, the Hebrew Bible is even stranger, and in ways that the King James translators may not have entirely comprehended, and yet their text performs the great trick of being at once recognizably English and also a little bit foreign. You can hear its distinctive cadences in the speeches of Lincoln, the poetry of Whitman, the novels of Cormac McCarthy.

Even in its time, the King James Bible was deliberately archaic in grammar and phraseology: an expression like «yea, verily», for example, had gone out of fashion some 50 years before. The translators didn't want their Bible to sound contemporary, because they knew that contemporaneity quickly goes out of fashion. In his very useful guide, «God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible», Adam Nicolson points out that when the Victorians came to revise the King James Bible in 1885, they embraced this principle wholeheartedly, and like those people who whack and scratch old furniture to make it look even more ancient, they threw in a lot of extra Jacobeanisms, like «howbeit», «peradventure», «holden» and «behooved».

This is the opposite, of course, of the procedure followed by most new translations, starting with Good News for Modern Man, a paperback Bible published by the American Bible Society in 1966, whose goal was to reflect not the language of the Bible but its ideas, rendering them into current terms, so that Ezekiel 23:20, for example («For she doted vpon their paramours, whose flesh is as the flesh of asses, and whose issue is like the issue of horses») becomes «She was filled with lust for oversexed men who had all the lustfulness of donkeys or stallions».

There are countless new Bibles available now, many of them specialized: a Bible for couples, for gays and lesbians, for recovering addicts, for surfers, for skaters and skateboarders, not to mention a superheroes Bible for children. They are all «accessible», but most are a little tone-deaf, lacking in grandeur and majesty, replacing «through a glasse, darkly», for instance, with something along the lines of «like a dim image in a mirror». But what this modernizing ignores is that the most powerful religious language is often a little elevated and incantatory, even ambiguous or just plain hard to understand. The new Catholic missal, for instance, does not seem to fear the forbidding phrase, replacing the statement that Jesus is «one in being with the Father» with the more complicated idea that he is «consubstantial with the Father».

## **Found in Translation: Parsing and Appreciating Difficult Texts**

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Not everyone prefers a God who talks like a pal or a guidance counselor. Even some of us who are nonbelievers want a God who speaketh like – well, God. The great achievement of the King James translators is to have arrived at a language that is both ordinary and heightened, that rings in the ear and lingers in the mind. And that all 54 of them were able to agree on every phrase, every comma, without sounding as gassy and evasive as the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, is little short of amazing, in itself proof of something like divine inspiration.

### **Questions for discussion and comprehension:**

- How many people worked on the King James Bible? How long did it take them?
- Why are translations – especially of sacred texts – often controversial?
- What elements contribute to the King James Bible being «one of the masterpieces of English prose»?
- Why is the King James Bible «deliberately archaic» in its grammar?
- How is this different from many contemporary translations of the Bible? What cultural trend does it reflect?

### **Section 2: Activities**

1). Tell students that they will be looking closely at the language of the King James Bible by comparing it to two «translations». Distribute the handout «Three Versions of the Book of Genesis», which includes text from three different versions of the first 10 verses of Genesis: the King James, SparkNotes and Contemporary English Version (CEV).

#### **Three Versions of the Book of Genesis**

Below are three versions of the same portion of chapter 1 of Genesis.

##### ***King James Version:***

The Creation

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
2. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
3. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
4. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
5. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

6. And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.
7. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.
8. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.
9. And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.
10. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.

<http://www.bartleby.com/108/01/1.html#1>

***Contemporary English Version:***

1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
2. The earth was barren, with no form of life; it was under a roaring ocean covered with darkness. But the Spirit of God was moving over the water.

**The First Day**

3. God said, «I command light to shine!» And light started shining.
4. God looked at the light and saw that it was good. He separated light from darkness and named the light «Day» and the darkness «Night». Evening came and then morning—that was the first day.

**5. The Second Day**

6. God said, «I command a dome to separate the water above it from the water below it».
7. And that's what happened. God made the dome and named it «Sky». Evening came and then morning—that was the second day.

**8. The Third Day**

9. God said, «I command the water under the sky to come together in one place, so there will be dry ground». And that's what happened.
10. God named the dry ground «Land», and he named the water «Ocean». God looked at what he had done and saw that it was good.

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=CEV>

***SparkNotes Summary:***

The Book of Genesis opens the Hebrew Bible with the story of creation. God, a spirit hovering over an empty, watery void, creates the world by speaking into the darkness and calling into being light, sky, land, vegetation, and living creatures over the course of six days. Each day, he

## Found in Translation: Parsing and Appreciating Difficult Texts

pauses to pronounce his works «good» (1:4). On the sixth day, God declares his intention to make a being in his «own image», and he creates humankind (1:26). He fashions a man out of dust and forms a woman out of the man's rib. God places the two people, Adam and Eve, in the idyllic garden of Eden, encouraging them to procreate and to enjoy the created world fully, and forbidding them to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/oldtestament/section1.rhtml>

2). Then ask three different students to read the texts aloud.

3). Ask the following questions for discussion:

- What differences do you notice in how these three texts sound?
- What do you notice about the language of each that is responsible for the different sounds?
- How well does the language of each suit its purpose?
- What appeals to you about the translations? Why?
- What does the King James version offer that the others do not? (In other words, what is lost in translation?)
- What are the rewards of reading the more difficult original text?
- When and how might a summary or modern translation be valuable?
- Why do English teachers encourage students to read actual books, rather than summaries?
- In what way does the reading experience count as much as the reading material?

4). Next, talk briefly about the purposes of each version, circling back to what the article says about why the King James version was created and why students think the SparkNotes and CEV versions exist.

5). Finally, tell students to read the three versions again, independently, and make notes in the margins about what they notice in terms of language – ask them to look at sentence structure, punctuation, vocabulary and poetic devices, as well as rhythm and voice. What do they notice about the language? Invite students to share their observations aloud.

Explain that they will delve more deeply into the issues raised today in an independent activity.

### Section 3. Going Further

Students do one of the following activities, using a text currently under consideration in the course.

## **Found in Translation: Parsing and Appreciating Difficult Texts**

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### ***1). Activities to do with texts written in an earlier time period:***

Translate the text into contemporary English, «teen speak» or slang, and reflect on these questions:

- Which words or phrases in the original become obsolete or scarce in contemporary literature?
- How might cultural nuances be offered by those words or phrases?
- For any of the words you replaced, is there a single word that offers the same meaning, or the same nuance of meaning?
- What do you think is lost or gained in your translation?

(\*This works particularly well for Shakespeare, Chaucer or Victorian novels and poems.)

Look at the SparkNotes summary of an excerpt of the text and compare it with the original, then reflect on what is lost in the summary, like meaning and humor, why people use guides like SparkNotes, and why the original text is worthwhile to read. Is anything gained? If so, what? They can also share their thoughts on our related Student Opinion question, Do You Use Study Guides?

### ***2). Activities to do with modern or contemporary texts:***

Look back at their notes on the language of the King James Bible and use what they discovered about its structure, grammar, syntax and vocabulary (repetition, «eth» verbs, anaphora) to translate an assigned piece of their classroom text into King James. They then read aloud from their work, in order, in a future class. Does this work for this particular text? Why or why not?

Take, in the spirit of «going backwards», a pop or rap song and «translate» it into standard academic English, as the Queens English 50c does (<http://twitter.com/#!/english50cent>), reflecting on what is gained and lost in the translation.

*(By Amanda Christy Brown and Holly Epstein Ojalvo// From The New York Learning Network, April 28, 2011)*