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The Word as word: A Canonical-Hermeneutical Approach to Translation

Michael Straus
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Dr. Michael Straus (PhD, University of Aberdeen, 2021) holds degrees in classical languages, law, and theology, and has previously published translations from Greek and Spanish.[1] This book is a much-revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation having the same title, but with this significant addition: "with Paul's Letter to the Colossians as a Test Case".[2]

A summary of the author's significant theological presuppositions that undergird his "canonical-hermeneutical" philosophy and translation approach will serve as an initial orientation (pp. 3–4, added emphasis):[3]

> My working premise is that the Word of God is understood to be actively present in the world through the biblical texts' ongoing reception, interpretation and application. If so, then *there may be an "excess of meaning" present in them beyond that which might have been perceived on first reading*. And as such, the interrelating effects of time and tradition on textual understanding ... should be reflected not only in exegesis, but also as the words are presented in translation. I therefore propose a translation methodology characterized by dialogic engagement with the biblical texts as they take effect

[1] See also: Straus, Michael. (2019) 2024. *The New Testament: A 21st century translation*. Second edition. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

[2] See at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358564659_The_Word_as_word_A_Canonical-Hermeneutical_Approach_to_Translation_with_Paul%27s_Letter_to_the_Colossians_as_a_Test_Case.

[3] Regarding the "theology of translation", see Liu, Chao-Chun. 2022. Theology in translation. *Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion* 3(1):1–26.

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> in church history and tradition; and I test its viability by application to Paul's Letter to the Colossians.

Given the preceding, one can better understand the manifold translation *skopos* for Straus's recent New Testament English rendition of Colossians as summarized below. At the end, it indicates some of the essential aspects regarding the "excess of meaning" that the author incorporates via footnoting as an explanatory-elucidatory commentary to accompany his translation (17):

- it "remains rooted in the literal Greek text",
- while "at the same time speaks with contemporary [English] stylistic energy",
- and it takes into consideration the following influential hermeneutical frames of reference:
  - the text's "paleographic and philological characteristics",
  - "its sociohistorical context",
  - its canonical setting,
  - "its reception and effective history in church doctrine and liturgy",
  - and "any 'classical' elements in its translation tradition".

An elaborate example of the author's expressed desire to provide such multilayered conceptual augmentation is illustrated by his rendering of Colossians 1:15 (226, original italics):

He is the Radiant[10] *Image*[11] *of the Invisible GOD*[12] *consubstantial with the FATHER*[13] *eternally begotten not made*[14] *Firstborn*[15] *above all Creation*[16] *...*

[10] Added from Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός).

[11] 2 Corinthians 4:4; Hebrews 1:3; Genesis 1:27 (κατ᾽ εἰκόνα Θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν); Wisdom 7:26; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 30, ¶ 20; Second Decree of the Council of Antioch (τοῦ πατρὸς ἀπαράλλακτον εἰκόνα); *cf.* Creed of Basil of Ancyra (Τοῖς ἀποκαλοῦσι τὰς ἱερὰς εἰκόνας εἴδωλα ἀνάθεμα).

[12] John 1:18; Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I.10.1; Hilary of Poitiers, *Liber (II) ad Constantium Imperatorem* 11 (*qui est imago dei invisibilis*); Basil of Caesarea, *Epistula* 38.8; *cf.* Plato, *Timaeus* 92c.

[13] Added from Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed; Chalcedonian Statement; Hilary of Poitiers, *De synodis* 84 (*unius substantiae cum patre* [*quod Graeci dicunt omousion*]); Athanasius, *Against the Arians* I.1.9 (μονάδα δὲ θεότητος ἀδιαίρετον καὶ ἄσχιστον).

[14] Added from Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed; Chalcedonian Statement; Psalms 2:7 (υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε), 110:4 (σὺ εἶ ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα).

[15] John 3:16; Romans 8:29; Hebrews 1:6; Exodus 4:22; Numbers 3:12-13; Proverbs 8:22; Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed; Origen, *In Matthaeum commentariorum series* 33 (*primogenito universae creaturae*).

[16] Genesis 4:22; Psalms 88:28 (LXX) (κἀγὼ πρωτότοκον θήσομαι αὐτόν, ὑψηλὸν παρὰ τοῖς βασιλεῦσιν τῆς γῆς); *Constitutiones Apostolorum* 6.11.1-2 (ἕνα μόνον θεὸν καταγγέλλομεν ..., θεὸν καὶ πατέρα τοῦ μονογενοῦς καὶ πρωτοτόκου πάσης δημιουργίας); Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 1.2; Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 85.2; Origen, *De Principiis* 1.4 (*ante omnem creaturam natus ex patre est*).

In support of his scholarly approach to Bible translation,[4] Straus presents a detailed line of argumentation, which can be only minimally summarized in this review. In the first major section, "Theoretical and Interpretive Principles" (I, 17–34), he documents the academic basis for his multidimensional methodology. This begins with a useful glossary of key terminology that appears in his study, which leads to an overview of the linguistic theories, ancient and modern, that establish the foundation for a "canonical-hermeneutical" translation approach and its relationship to former "historical-critical" models.

[4] "In short, I propose a canonical-hermeneutical approach to translation that relies on modern paleographic, philological, and sociohistorical scholarship at the same time as it accounts for textual understandings reflected in the past as well as ongoing life of the church" (8).

The distinctive aspect of this intricate hermeneutical framework is that it also incorporates the historical dimension of Scripture interpretation as developed in the Old and New Testament canons as well as classic credal and liturgical formulations within the venerable tradition of the Christian faith.

In the first portion of the book's principal section II, "Elements of a Canonical-Hermeneutical Translation Approach/Test Case" (35–58), Straus expounds his methodology based on the broad principles set forth in section I. He begins with an analytical description of current translation techniques (literal, dynamic or functional equivalent,[5] and paraphrase) along with certain "classical" formulations (especially Wycliffe and the KJV tradition). This survey includes an "excursus on translation committees" in which Nida and Taber's "guidelines" in *TAPOT* are roundly critiqued (53–58):

> It is perhaps fair to ask whether the unmemorability of many modern translations is attributable, at least in part, to Nida's influence, such that translation projects geared to a dynamic equivalence methodology have inadvertently 'distanc[ed] form and meaning' and thereby diminished the role of 'biblical language and [the] theology of the word and sacraments as the *media salutis'* [means of salvation].[6]

Straus then employs Colossians to test the viability of his translation methodology (58–157). This is comprised of a manifold background study with reference to: the epistolary genre of Colossians; the Colossian isagogical setting; its relationships with other relevant writings (NT letters, LXX, major credal and liturgical formulations, noncanonical works); and Paul's use of diverse registers (hymnic, liturgical, doctrinal, rhetorical, pastoral, and prosaic). In his instructive consideration of key terms and phrases in Colossians, Straus identifies alternative translation options and explains how the methodology of his thesis aids in selecting among them. This part of the analysis is divided into several subsections, including a helpful contrastive exposition of the letter's prominent use of elevated terminology and doctrinal language to describe the divine Son in contrast to Pauline polemical usage of "negativizing rhetoric" to counter

[5] Page 42; actually, these two terms do not refer to the same type of translation approach; see: Statham, Nigel. 2003. Dynamic equivalence and functional equivalence: How do they differ? *The Bible Translator* 54(1):102–111 https://doi.org/10.1177/026009350305400102.

[6] Page 8, citing Stefan Felber. Of course, it is rather easy to criticize Nida's dynamic equivalence methodology from the temporal distance of nearly a half century, and completely divorced from the prevailing translation setting in which he and his colleagues were working at the time (the age of "missionary versions"). But one wonders, on the other hand, if Straus has adopted a perspective on Bible translating that is overly "theological" and formal in nature.

alternative understandings of the person of Christ, particularly within his own sociocultural and religious setting, but also as manifested in the Christological and Trinitarian struggles of subsequent church history (e.g., 121).

In a more focused application portion of section II (157–205), Straus documents the text's translation-tradition with special reference to what he terms the "Colossian Hymn" (1:15–20), which he regards as the letter's most distinctive portion from a linguistic, doctrinal, and stylistic perspective. This investigation is divided into three subsections. First, he examines the tradition that commenced with Jerome's Latin Vulgate, was extended into Middle English with Wycliffe, further developed by Tyndale, and continued onwards through the KJV, RSV, and ESV to the present. Next, in an interesting discussion, he evaluates examples of three types of modern translation with reference to the hymnic pericope: "dynamic equivalence" (e.g., GNB, NIV), "paraphrase" (e.g., Peterson, NLT), and "specialized versions" (e.g., amplified, interlinear texts). In the mix, he also critiques the first (2019) edition of his own NT translation, termed a "hybrid approach" (209), that was published before he arrived at the unique approach promoted in his doctoral dissertation (2021). This segment concludes with several observations concerning the application of "linguistic and literary analysis" to the biblical text and the relevance of "translation-tradition" to his canonical-hermeneutical methodology (202–205).

In section III (206–216), Straus applies his canonical-hermeneutical technique with respect to an assortment of important translational procedures. First, he discusses the general principles involved in determining appropriate English textual wording, and then he provides a summary listing of the distinctive ways in which his translation reflects the methodology of his thesis, for example, with regard to: the elimination of chapter and verse numbers; punctuation; paragraphing; capitalization; the use of italics; highlighting the occurrence of *nomina sacra* (references to God); and the footnoting of intra-scriptural quotations, LXX references, non-canonical texts, and textually pertinent historical (credal and doctrinal) materials[7]—all being "selected in aid or providing an expanded means of access to the *verbum interius* of a given [biblical] text" (216).[8]

In section IV (217–223), Straus postulates how his thesis contributes to current research in the field of Bible translation and offers prospective areas for further research along with some advice for translators who may wish to utilize

[7] Found in the author's dissertation (280–296) but not in this book is a section that presents a valuable excursus on text-critical methods, which is exemplified by a detailed discussion of selected case studies found in Colossians.

[8] "Augustine … adopted the term verbum interius to describe that which exists in the mind before its expression" (19–20; cf. 53, 62, 109).

its methodology, including sixteen "prolegomena to any future translation". This is followed by Appendix A, which provides the author's English translation of *To the Colossians* (225–233), followed by his Acknowledgments (235–236), an extensive Bibliography (237–257), and several Indices (Subject and Ancient Document, including biblical).

Straus states the multifaceted, theologically-oriented aim of his new translation as follows:[9]

> My goal in this translation has been to bring some fresh turns of phrase to the New Testament's varied texts, adapting linguistic forms as a given genre or writer's style might suggest. My aim is not to supplant prior translations so much as to shed light on obscure passages; capture the humanity of Jesus' personality as presented in the Gospels; intelligibly convey doctrine and experience as related in Acts and the Epistles; and reflect the atemporal nature of the Book of Revelation. The translation seeks to be at once enjoyable, novelistic and at times poetic, avoiding the overly-literal, freely adopting the colloquial, and taking grammatical license where the writer employed imagery not subject to standard linguistic limitations.

Despite his extensive critique of Nida's promotion and application of "dynamic equivalence" in Bible translation (e.g., in the GNB, NIV, TLB, NLT; 42–48, 177–179), Straus surprisingly claims that his "methodology allows room for literal, dynamic and paraphrastic approaches to a given text, the style potentially varying depending on the genre or register involved" (219). But one wonders how this flexibility in rendering might be accomplished in practice, given the author's need to extensively frame his version by means of many marginal references to dogmatic formulations and prior translation tradition along with the usual intertextual citations.[10] Readers can come to their own conclusion on the basis of the following, longer sample, Colossians 1:3-8 (225; reproduced as closely as possible to the author's published text):

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[9] From the author's "description" of this translation: https://wipfandstock.com/9798385211722/the-new-testament-second-edition/.

[10] "Nida's dynamic equivalency theory in fact denies the relevance of 'writings of the early Church Fathers' or of 'creeds' in determining textual meaning" (44; with reference to Nida and Taber 1969:8, 31). In contrast, "I … emphasize the importance to modern translation of acknowledging and retaining the text's effective history in church history and tradition. And I argue that this can be accomplished without compromising modern intelligibility or stylistic elegance. … I therefore aimed as well for colloquial energy without jettisoning traditional understandings" (10).

> We give thanks always to GOD, FATHER of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, in our prayers for you, having heard of your faith in CHRIST JESUS and the love you have toward all the saints on account of the hope stored up for you in Heaven, that hope of which you have heard before in the True Word[1] of the gospel made present among you[2] as it becomes fruitful and multiplies through the whole Earth,[3] just as it has in you from the very first day you heard and fully understood the Grace of GOD, being instructed truthfully in the Word by Epaphras, our beloved fellow laborer. He is CHRIST's faithful servant on your behalf; and has made plain to us your love in the SPIRIT.

[1] John 1:1. Literally, "the word of the truth of the gospel."

[2] John 1:14.

[3] Genesis 1:28 (αὐξάνεσθε καὶ πληθύνεσθε καὶ πληρώσατε τὴν γῆν), 9:1; Isaiah 27:6 (ἐξανθήσει ᾽Ισραὴλ καὶ ἐμπλησθήσεται ἡ οἰκουμένη τοῦ καρποῦ αὐτοῦ); Acts 6:7, 12:24.

One might suggest that the author's literalistic translation could be formatted creatively as shown below to facilitate more effective oral and rhythmic articulation as well as aural perception when read in public:

We give thanks always to GOD,
FATHER of our LORD JESUS CHRIST,
in our prayers for you,
having heard of your faith in CHRIST JESUS
and the love you have toward all the saints
on account of the hope stored up for you in Heaven,
that hope of which you have heard before
in the True Word of the gospel made present among you
as it becomes fruitful and multiplies through the whole Earth,
just as it has in you
from the very first day you heard
and fully understood the Grace of GOD,
being instructed truthfully in the Word by Epaphras,
our beloved fellow laborer.
He is CHRIST's faithful servant on your behalf,
and has made plain to us your love in the SPIRIT.

Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ (SBL Greek text, for comparison)
πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι,
ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ
καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους
διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,
ἣν προηκούσατε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου
τοῦ παρόντος εἰς ὑμᾶς,
καθὼς καὶ ἐν παντὶ τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν
καρποφορούμενον καὶ αὐξανόμενον
καθὼς καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν,
ἀφ᾽ ἧς ἡμέρας ἠκούσατε
καὶ ἐπέγνωτε τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ·
καθὼς ἐμάθετε ἀπὸ Ἐπαφρᾶ
τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν,
ὅς ἐστιν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ,
ὁ καὶ δηλώσας ἡμῖν τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην ἐν πνεύματι.

Straus summarizes the scholarly value of his hermeneutical-canonical approach to translation studies as follows (217):

> [It] provides original contributions in several areas of Biblical studies, in the first instance by applying Patristic, Scholastic, Reform and Contemporary linguistic insights to the art of translation, developing a novel methodological approach that takes into account a text's *Wirkungsgeschichte* by incorporating elements of that living history not previously considered in this context. ... The methodology advanced here also contributes to canon theory by taking a translational approach dependent on the "wholeness" of Scripture. It offers a contribution to church history by expanding existing translation methodologies in order to elucidate textual effects on credal, doctrinal and liturgical development and their reciprocal revelation of textual meaning. And it offers this philologically and theologically informed approach to Biblical translation in service of the church's practical work of proclamation and worship.

Nida and Taber wrote many years ago, "Even the old question: Is this a *correct* translation? must be answered in terms of another question, namely: For whom? *Correctness* must be determined by the extent to which the average reader for which a translation is intended will be likely to understand it correctly" (*TAPOT*, 1). Does Straus provide us with a "correct" translation? That is probably the wrong question to ask nowadays. Perhaps we could substitute the italicized words with "useful/utility", but that may not help our process of critical

evaluation since the Straus version clearly does not aim to achieve naturalness or general intelligibility.

However, the one question that is relevant is "For whom?" In the case of the footnote-amplified Straus rendition, there are undoubtedly many translators and teams that could benefit from its use as a "formal correspondence" base text along with the many intertextual cross references. With regard to all the other types of dogmatic and credal quotations provided in this book, that would depend on the local translation "brief" (job commission) and contextually determined *skopos* of the version being undertaken. In any case, all those involved in "the theory and practice" of Bible translation would benefit from a sustained or selective examination of this book due to the broad range of translation issues discussed and the arguments for or against certain textual, contextual, and paratextual methodologies. As for the Straus translation of Colossians itself, in my opinion, it is a version judiciously prepared by an erudite biblical scholar and well-crafted for like-minded colleagues.