

FIRST SAMUEL 13:1

Translation from one language to another requires not only intimate familiarity with both languages but the skill to convey the meaning in one language to another language. This is especially important when the author of one of the languages is God. Does the translator translate the meaning of the words or does the translator look at all of the words of a particular text and translate what he believes to be the meaning of that text? That is, does he need to know and understand the meaning of a collection of words in order to translate them? The fundamental question, actually, more than a question, the fundamental problem with translating the meaning of a Bible passage rather than the individual words is that one must assume the translator fully knows God's intended meaning of this collection of words.

In biblical translation the attempt to translate word-for-word meaning is called formal equivalence. The primary formal equivalence translations using the Received Text are the King James Version, KJV, and the new King James Version, NKJV. Those using the Critical Text are the American Standard Version, ASV, and the new American Standard, NAS. The New English Translation, NET, could probably be called semi-formal equivalence and uses the Critical Text. One thing that can be said for the Net Bible is the great number of translation notes which explain why the translation may differ from the word meaning in the text.

Translating the meaning of an entire passage is called dynamic equivalence. The primary dynamic equivalence translations using the Critical Text are the New International Version, NIV, the English Standard Version, ESV, and the Revised Standard Version, RSV.

There are many other Bible translations, including even those which make an effort at being gender specific. This article is not intended to be a critical examination of any biblical translation but those mentioned above are good translations for Bible study. Many of the dynamic equivalent translations are so far from the actual text they are of little or no value for serious Bible study.

These introductory remarks on biblical translation are intended to point out why the serious Bible student should give careful consideration to the translation he chooses for study and his use of the original languages. We are convinced that the Bible is the Word of God, not man's word. Although Moses or Paul or whoever may have written portions of the Bible, they did not author it. God is the author and has given us His Word to be "*profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.*" All translation effort should be fully convinced that this is the Word of the living God, not the effort of any human writer. In the translation of His Word, the translator faces the same problems characteristic of any effort to translate from one language to another.

We believe that most translators desire to do their best to make the Bible meaningful to the reader. In doing this, if he decides that the apparent meaning of a collection of words in a sentence would not make sense to the reader, or himself, he will attempt to change the

translation so that it makes sense. That is, at least it makes sense to the translator who is influenced by his theological convictions. For example look at Rom 3:22

KJV Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

ESV the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

If the translator believes that πίστει, *faith*, is a verbal noun he can translate the Genitive Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, *Jesus Christ*, as either subjective, KJV, or objective, ESV. Clearly the choice is greatly influenced by his theological convictions. In this case, even though the context clearly argues for the subjective, the “faithfulness of Jesus Christ,” yet, if his theological convictions lead him to believe that either one is made righteous or that God’s righteousness is shown by placing personal faith in Christ he would chose to translate as objective, the ESV, “faith in Jesus Christ.”

There are many cases of word or phrase translation such as this but one good illustration of entire sentence translation in God’s word is first Samuel chapter 13 verse one. The verse says in the Hebrew “*a son of a year was Saul when he became king and two years he reigned over Israel.*”

The Hebrew expression “*a son of a year*” means a child one year old so a literal English translation would be “Saul was one year old when he became king and he reigned two years over Israel.” Of course this apparently makes no sense to the translator. It must be an error by the scribe, or some words are missing, or... Since most translators do not want to skip a sentence, they try to translate the text in a way which would make sense to the reader even if it requires changing the text or inserting words that are not in the original. Serious translators usually add a note indicating the problem. In many cases these notes lead the reader to conclude there are problems with the trustworthiness of God’s Word.

We have already pointed out that the King James, the New King James, the American Standard and the New American Standard versions are formal equivalent translations. For 1Sam 13:1 they are:

*KJV
Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel*

*NKJV
Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two more years over Israel*

*ASV
Saul was forty years old when he began to reign; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,*

NASV

Saul was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty two years over Israel.

We had also suggested the ESV and the NET versions as semi-formal, they are:

ESV

Saul was... years old when he began to reign, and he reigned... and two years over Israel,

NET

Saul was [thirty] years old when he began to reign, he ruled over Israel for [forty] years.

The NET Bible notes are:

1. The MT does not have “thirty.” A number appears to have dropped out of the Hebrew text here, since as it stands the MT (literally, “a son of a year”) must mean that Saul was only one year old when he began to reign! The KJV, attempting to resolve this, reads “Saul reigned one year,” but that is not the normal meaning of the Hebrew text represented by the MT. Although most LXX mss lack the entire verse, some Greek mss have “thirty years” here (while others have “one year” like the MT). The Syriac Peshitta has Saul’s age as twenty-one. But this seems impossible to harmonize with the implied age of Saul’s son Jonathan in the following verse. Taking into account the fact that in v. 2 Jonathan was old enough to be a military leader, some scholars prefer to supply in v. 1 the number forty (cf. ASV, NASB). The present translation (“thirty”) is a possible but admittedly uncertain proposal based on a few Greek mss and followed by a number of English versions (e.g., NIV, NCV, NLT). Other English versions simply supply ellipsis marks for the missing number (e.g., NAB, NRSV).

2. The MT has “two years” here. If this number is to be accepted as correct, the meaning apparently would be that after a lapse of two years at the beginning of Saul’s reign, he then went about the task of consolidating an army as described in what follows (cf. KJV, ASV, CEV). But if the statement in v. 1 is intended to be a comprehensive report on the length of Saul’s reign, the number is too small. According to Acts 13:21 Saul reigned for forty years. Some English versions (e.g., NIV, NCV, NLT), taking this forty to be a round number, add it to the “two years” of the MT and translate the number in 2 Sam 13:1 as “forty-two years.” While this is an acceptable option, the present translation instead replaces the MT’s “two” with the figure “forty.” Admittedly the textual evidence for this decision is weak, but the same can be said of any attempt to restore sense to this difficult text (note the ellipsis marks at this point in NAB, NRSV).

It is amazing that even though all six of these translations are among the best we have suggested for serious Bible study, and are efforts at word for word translation, none of them have actually translated the original text word for word. As mentioned above, the literal translation would be “*Saul was one year old when he became king and he reigned two years over Israel.*” It is clear that none of these translators considered this a sensible translation so instead of formal

equivalence they have all moved to translating meaning, that is, their meaning, rather than the actual words of the text.

To illustrate how common this is here are several other translations of this verse:

Revised Version 1885

Saul was thirty years old when he began to reign and he reigned two years over Israel

Revised Version 1901

Saul was forty years old when he began to reign; and when he had reigned two years,

Revised Standard Version

Saul was...years old when he began to reign; and he reigned...and two years over Israel.

Darby Version 1889

Saul was...years old when he became king; and he reigned two years over Israel.

Webster Version

Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,

Geneva Bible 1599

Saul nowe had beene King one yeere, and he reigned two yeeres ouer Israel

Jewish Publication Society 1917

Saul was ...years old when he began to reign, and two years he reigned over Israel

Jewish Publication Society Tanaka

Saul was ...years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel two years.

Revised Webster Version 1995

Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,

New International Version

Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty two years.

New American Bible

(Saul was... years old when he became king and he reigned... (two) years over Israel.)

Note: A formula like that of 2 Sam 5:4 was introduced here at some time; but the age of Saul when he became king remains blank, and the two years assigned for his reign in the received text cannot be correct. Tradition (Acts 13:21) offers the round number, "forty years."

New International Bible

Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel for forty two years.

New Jerusalem Bible

Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned for forty-two years.

New Literal Translation

Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned for forty-two years

New English Translation

Saul was [thirty] years old when he began to reign; he ruled over Israel for [forty] years.

The Amplified Bible

Saul was [forty] years old when he began to reign; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,

The Message Bible

Saul was a young man when he began as king. He was king over Israel for many years.

New Living Translation

Saul thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned for forty-two years.

Good News Bible

Note: The Hebrew text is defective at two points in this verse.

New Life Version

Saul forty years old when he began to rule. He ruled over Israel thirty years.

New Century Version

Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he was king over Israel forty-two years.

21st Century KJV

Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,

Holman Christian Standard Bible

Saul was 30 years old when he became king, and he reigned 42 years over Israel.

The Bible in Basic English

Omits the verse

LXX

Saul was a son a year in his taking reign, and two years he reigned in Israel.

It should be pointed out that in some translated versions of the Septuagint, LXX, like the Septuaginta ‚Rahlfs‘, or that of Charles Thomson, the scholars who translated them did not understand the verse but rather than insert words of their own they chose not to include the verse. The Hebrew words were there and the Greek translators translated them, why did some of the translators of the LXX decide not to translate them and instead just ignore the entire verse? It appears that these translators thought not translating the verse was better than putting in words which were not there.

Young’s Literal Translation

A son of a year is Saul in his reigning, yea, two years he hath reigned over Israel

Douay Rhems 1899

Saul was a child of one year when he began to reign, and he reigned two years over Israel.

It is interesting that only two rather old translations (Young’s Literal and the Douay Rhems) have actually given us close to a literal rendering of the verse. The vast majority of scholarly translators have come to the conclusion that the literal meaning of the original text does not make sense. Therefore they have put in words that are not there and have taken out words that are there, all in an effort to give what they conclude to be a possible meaning.

It would therefor seem reasonable for those of us who are not skilled translators to accept this and move on. . . but we are left with the disturbing thought that for this verse, we are not reading the Word of the living God but the words of men who do not even agree among themselves as to the correct meaning. Even more disturbing, is this true of other passages of Scripture? Should it be so hard for a translator to translate the words of a passage of Scripture and admit that even though he has no idea what the collection of words mean, here is what it says. Surely those of us who are students of the Word have the right to expect the translator to give us what God said, not what he thinks God should have said.

Let’s spend a moment thinking about 1 Sam 13:1 “*Saul was one year old when he became king and he reigned two years over Israel.*” We can agree with most of the scholars and admit that as it stands it does not seem to make sense. On the other hand, is this not God’s Word, and is He telling us something He wants us to know?

In chapter 10 Saul was told that the Spirit of the Lord would come on him and he would be changed into “another man,” a “new man.” Later, in chapter 11, the people made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal and in chapter 12 the Lord said if they and the king would fear the Lord and serve Him and obey His voice both the people and the king would continue following the Lord.

Here in chapter 13, Saul had lived as God's man for one year and then was made king. Now as king he has reigned two years over Israel and is in conflict with the Philistines. The people of Israel were distressed and Saul, rather than trusting the Lord, disobeyed Him and offered burnt offerings he had no right to offer. The result, chapter 13 verses 13 and 14, *And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee.*

Thus verse one could mean, from God's point of view, Saul as "another man," as God's man, was one year old when he began to reign. After he had reigned two years he was engaged in conflict with the Philistines and the account goes on to detail his sin and the result of that sin.

Or much better, and consistent with other Scripture, from God's point of view, Saul as "another man," as God's man, was one year old when he began to reign and because of his sin, he reigned for only two years. *The LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people.* Saul was no longer God's king, for God had chosen David to be the "captain over His people."

Saul now spent over thirty years in the flesh, disobeying the Lord and trying to kill David in an effort to hold on to a kingdom which he knew God had taken from him and given to David. At the end of his life, 1 Sam 28, he was pleading with the Lord but the Lord would not answer because Saul, in the flesh, was asking what he knew was not God's will. It was then Saul went to the woman at Endor who called up Samuel. It was Samuel who reminded Saul the Lord had departed from him and this night He, Saul, would be with Samuel. Surely Samuel was with the Lord and thus so Saul would be with the Lord. Virtually a whole life in the flesh, a life of sin and disobedience, but at the end, with the God of all grace.

A life of which God could say of His new man, he was one year old when he began to reign and his reign only lasted 2 years.

This thought is not unique. We look at Lot's life and see mostly failure, a life of choice in the city of Sodom, yet God sees him as righteous and says:

*2Pe 2:7 And delivered **just Lot**, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked:*

We see Sarah laughing at the thought that she and her husband would have an heir in their old age. More than that, conniving to obtain an heir through giving her hand maiden to her husband; yet God says:

Heb 11:11 *Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, **because she judged him faithful who had promised.***

Our God does not count time the same way we do. Because of His grace the time that counts is the time in fellowship with Him as new creations in Christ. He does not see or count the time of the flesh in sin and disobedience. In the New Testament, whenever He speaks of His people in the Old Testament He not only never mentions their sins but sees them as righteous.

Think of the wonder of His grace - this is the way He sees us as well:

*Col 1:21-22 And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet **now** hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you **holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight:***

We struggle with the truth of such grace. Our Lord, who left the glory of Heaven and the adulation of the angels to become incarnate and die as our substitute, does not look on the sins of the flesh. He sees his own ***holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight.*** This is the way He looked at Saul.

One final example:

How many sermons have been preached on the seeming contradiction between 1Ki 6:1 and Acts 13:17-22.

1 Ki 6:1 ¶ *And it came to pass in the **four hundred and eightieth year** after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Zif, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD.*

We can break this down:

Wandering in the wilderness	40
Saul's reign	40
David's reign	40
Solomon's reign at this time	3
In his 4 th year he had reigned 3	<hr/>
	123
 The period of the Judges	 480 - 123 = 357
 Total	 <hr/> 480

Now in Acts:

Acts 13:17-22 *17 The God of this people of Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an high arm brought he them out of it. And about the time of **forty years** suffered he their manners in the wilderness. And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Chanaan, he divided their land to them by lot. And after that he gave unto them judges about the space of **four hundred and fifty years**, until Samuel the prophet.*

*And afterward they desired a king: and God gave unto them Saul the son of Cis, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, by the space of **forty years**. And when he had removed him, he raised up unto them David to be their king; to whom also he gave testimony, and said, I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will.*

Since we know David reigned 40 years, all the times, except the period of the judges, are the same in both passages. That time in 1 Kings it is 357 years and in Acts it is 450 years, a difference of 93 years. Going through the book of Judges we find five times when Israel was in bondage, did not control the temple and could not sacrifice and serve the Lord, they are:

3:8	Chushanrishathaim..	8
3:14	Eglon, the king of Moab	18
4:3	Jabin, king of Canaan	20
6:1	Midian	7
13:1	Philistines	40
	Total	<hr/> 93

Here again, the Lord in 1 Kings did not count the years His children were in the flesh, disobedient, not having access to the temple at Jerusalem and not serving Him. Why is this not true for Saul in 1 Sam 13:1? More than that, He wants us to know this is characteristic of His grace and love for all of us as well.

*Heb 8:12 For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and **their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.***

*Heb 10:17 And **their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.***

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