Review Article
An Evaluation of the Recent Bible Translations by Goldingay (2018) and McKnight (2023)

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: In the last decade there have been several new translations of both the old and new testaments that have been published by individual scholars, and each has its own promises and pitfalls. In the work of Bible translation there are always elements of interpretation, and as more biblical manuscripts have been discovered in recent years there remain continuous efforts to better shape our understanding of the ancient text. In this article, I will evaluate the recent Bible translations by Goldingay (2018) and Mcknight (2023), noting how these translations are different than previous translations and what makes them distinct. In this examination, I will draw attention to specific passages that are either difficult to translate or are controversial in the way that they are translated, evaluating how Goldingay and McKnight handle such texts in comparison with previous translations. This analysis seeks to help readers understand that while every modern translation has its promises and its pitfalls, Goldingay and McKnight have provided unique and interesting versions that can especially benefit better-educated readers.

1. INTRODUCTION

While somewhat misleading, the claim that "all translation is interpretation" has become axiomatic.[1] This can seem an unavoidable conclusion when two languages are different enough that lexical and syntactical features cannot fully be mapped from one to another. Translators must make choices that are not always value-neutral. When we bring ancient languages into the conversation this becomes much more complicated, and no translation process is more fraught with controversy than the translation of the Bible. Whether there is an effort to move closer to the ancient language and context (often called "functional equivalence") or a move closer to the reader's language and context (often called "dynamic equivalence"), translations never gain universal acceptance. Beyond this, when it comes to the Bible, there are so many translations available that new translators face substantial challenges and must justify the existence of their translation.[2] Occasionally, however, there are new translations that appear and deserve serious consideration.

1   See the discussion in Leland Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009): 23–5.

2   Mark Strauss suggests that modern translators face five primary challenges: lexical issues, figurative language, cultural differences, gender issues, and matters of style (*40 Questions about Bible Translation* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2023]: 85–196). There are also paratextual decisions (like where to place paragraph breaks, or whether to insert headings to separate subjects) that have major import, since these are absent in the earliest manuscripts.

Within the last decade, several interesting Bible translations have appeared that are the work of individual scholars rather than translation committees.[3] Two notable examples are Robert Alter's 2018 translation of the Old Testament[4] and David Bentley Hart's 2017 translation of the New Testament,[5] both of which have produced a significant scholarly response.[6] The reason why new translations are produced can be myriad, but criticism of previous translations can be a perennial motivator. For example, the ESV has been criticized for Complementarian leanings,[7] and Brian Simmons's dynamic "Passion translation" has been criticized for being over-interpretive and theologically biased.[8] Because of what the Bible *means* to so many of its readers as a sacred text, perceived change to that text (whether in wording, style, or other alteration) is not always welcome. Translation choices that caused controversy decades ago (like the controversy over gender-neutral language[9]) are

not the same concerns of translators today, but every new translation brings with it an opportunity to ask different questions about how to bring these ancient texts to readers in today's context.[10] With IVP's publication of two new translations recently (Goldingay's *First Testament* in 2018 and McKnight's *Second Testament* in 2023), the hard questions that translation brings are ever before us. Given the status of each author within his respective field and the unique elements of each translation, a thorough evaluation of these interesting works is in order.

II. GOLDINGAY'S OLD TESTAMENT: METHOD AND EXAMPLES

From the preface, Goldingay insists that he tries to stick very close to the Hebrew (and Aramaic) words rather than paraphrasing them (that is, he leans toward "functional equivalence" or word-for-word translation; p. vii). When a particular Hebrew phrase is ambiguous or unclear, he generally prefers to leave these unclear rather than making guesses or textual emendations (p. vii). Throughout his translation, Goldingay also tends to use mostly masculine language and pronouns (rather than inserting "he or she" or "him or her"), and, when possible, he does use vernacular, idiomatic English (e.g., "I'll" and "we'll"). Before his rendering of Genesis, Goldingay includes a general introduction to the Old Testament with some basic (yet concise) background information along with a (rough) timeline of events from the Exodus until the life of Jesus (pp. xi–xiv). He also includes a short introduction of

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3   New translations meant for wider use are still being developed; the next to come is the New Tyndale Version (NTV) planned for 2026 on the five hundredth anniversary of William Tyndale's English Bible.

4   Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, 4 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).

5   David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

6   For the reception of Hart's translation, see Steve Berneking, "What's New about David Bentley Hart's Translation of the New Testament: Assessing Its Translation Effectiveness and Affectiveness," *TBT* 73.2 (2022): 191–202; for the reception of Alter's translation, see Lénart de Regt, "Robert Alter's New Translation of the Hebrew Bible: An Assessment for Translators," *TBT* 73.2 (2022): 157–73. Also worth noting is Terry Wildman's *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2021), which is still recent but has been positively received.

7   Judy Hansen, "Uncovering the Dark Side of the ESV Bible Translation: How Men Massaged One Version of God's Word to Perpetuate Harmful Gender Roles," *Medium*, 9 May 2023.

8   Andrew Shead, "Burning Scripture with Passion: A Review of the Psalms (The Passion Translation)," *Themelios* 43.1 (2018): 58–71.

9   e.g., Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: B&H, 2000).

10   For example, following recent cultural changes surrounding sexuality and gender, modern translators could face different questions about how best to communicate terms referring to same-sex relationships than translators several decades ago. In a different way, manuscript discoveries (like the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in the 1940s) have raised new questions about which renderings are most precise, given the increased number of possible textual variants.

William Bowes, Review Article | RA3
'An Evaluation of the Recent Bible Translations
by Goldingay (2018) and McKnight (2023'

(typically) a few paragraphs for each biblical book, discussing the purpose, structure, and basic content of each book. His introductions tend to avoid controversial questions and the concerns of higher criticism. For example, in his introduction to Isaiah, he notes that the book has an important tripartite division but does not suggest that the text was written by more than one author (p. 648).

One of the interesting aspects of Goldingay's translation choice is his transliterations. For example, "Yisra'el" replaces "Israel" and "Mosheh" replaces "Moses". This is consistent in the many uses of names and places throughout, which admittedly makes for some slower (and sometimes much more difficult) reading than the reading that most students of the Bible would be accustomed. Unlike most modern translations (including Alter's 2018 translation), Goldingay does not substitute LORD for the Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH but replaces this with "Yahweh." Instead of "Law" (or "Torah"), Goldingay tends to prefer "Instruction" (e.g., Goldingay renders Ps. 1:2 thus: "Rather, his delight is in Yahweh's instruction, and he murmurs about his instruction day and night," p. 527). The rather ambiguous poetic term "selah" that occurs in many of the Psalms is rendered as "rise," which is a rather unique choice. Typically, Goldingay also translates "righteousness" as "faithfulness," which is a plausible translation given the semantic range of the Hebrew *tsedeq* but is somewhat controversial given the fact that "righteousness" and "faithfulness" have different meanings in English. In terms of present scholarly trends about the meaning of *tsedeq*, Goldingay has plenty of support.[11] However, some readers more accustomed to the language of "righteousness" will likely

find such changes difficult.

In order to further elucidate Goldingay's method, it may be useful to provide some examples alongside other recent translations. Three examples are included below, each one being a memorable text that tends to be translated differently. In order to illustrate different approaches to translation, I include Robert Alter's rendering (2018) as well as the NIV (2011). The Hebrew (Masoretic Text) is included to show the basis for each translation, with certain portions in bold for comparison.

Genesis 1:1–2

MT: *bərêšîṯ bārā 'ĕlōhîm; 'ēṯ haššāmayim wə'ēṯ hā'āreṣ. wəhā'āreṣ, hāyəṯāh ṯōhū wāḇōhū, wəḥōšeḵ 'al pənê ṯəhōwm; wərūaḥ 'ĕlōhîm, məraḥep̄eṯ 'al-pənê hammāyim.*

NIV: **In the beginning God created** the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Alter: **When God began to create** heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, (p. 11)

Goldingay: **At the beginning of God's creating** the heavens and the earth, when the earth was an empty void, with darkness over the face of the deep, and God's breath sweeping over the face of the water, (p. 2)

The Hebrew language of the Bible's first sentence is rather ambiguous and is probably not best rendered "in the beginning." Alter's translation also captures the essence of the rather awkward phrase, which seems to refer to an early point in a series of actions more than it refers to an ultimate chronological beginning. While the image of "God's breath sweeping" is a bit less poetic than his "Spirit … hovering" the term *rūaḥ* technically means "breath." In this case, I would suggest

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11   One of the many studies on the meaning of this term in Gen 15:6 is Benjamin Schließer, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4: Paul's Concept of Faith in light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6*, WUNT 2/224 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

that Goldingay's translation captures the meaning of the text well.

Isaiah 53:5

MT: *wəhū məḥōlāl mippəšāʿênū, məḏukkā mêʿăwōnōṯênū; mūsar šəlōwmênū ʿālāw, ūḇaḥăḇurāṯōw nirpā-lānū.*

NIV: But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; **the punishment that brought us peace was on him**, and by his wounds we are healed.

Alter: yet he was wounded for our crimes, crushed for our transgressions. **The chastisement that restored our well-being he bore**, and through his bruising we are healed (p. 802).

Goldingay: But he was the one who was wounded through our rebellions, crushed through our wayward acts. **Chastisement to bring us well-being was on him**, and by means of his being hurt there was healing for us (p. 696).

Here we see an interesting choice by both Alter and Goldingay to translate the pregnant term *šālôm* as "well-being." The possible meanings of this term are wide-ranging,[12] and in my opinion "well-being" is probably as close as one can get to an accurate English rendering. We also see in this verse the variety of ways that Goldingay translates various Hebrew terminology indicating sin or offense against God.

Micah 6:8

MT: *higgîḏ ləḵā ʾāḏām mahṭōwḇ; ūmāh-Yahweh dōwrêš mimməḵā, kî ʾimʿăśōʿwṭ mišˑpāṭ wəʾahăḇaṯ ḥeseḏ, wəhaṣnêaʿ leḵeṯ ʾimʾĕlōheḵā.*

NIV: He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? **To act justly and to love mercy and**

to walk humbly with your God.

Alter: It was told to you, man, what is good and what the LORD remands of you – **only doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly** with your God (p. 1314).

Goldingay: He has told you, people, what is good, what Yahweh requires from you: Rather, **exercising authority and being loyal to commitment, and being diffident in how you walk** with your God (p. 881).

In this case, Goldingay's translation departs from most modern renderings of this verse. This is partially due to his decision about how to translate the Hebrew *ḥeseḏ*, which is polysemous and fairly culture-bound.[13] Goldingay's translation "being loyal to commitment" is terribly clunky, even if it does capture the essence of the phrase. That being said, Alter's rendering of *ḥeseḏ* as "kindness" probably represents a missed opportunity to more fully express the depth of this word, which would have been so important in its ancient context. While Goldingay's choice here illustrates an effort to express the language clearly, it is one of several instances where both aesthetic appeal and semantic clarity may have been sacrificed for the sake of accuracy. Frankly, readers of Goldingay's translation may be left wondering what it is, exactly, that Micah is saying Yahweh requires of them.

Regardless of a reader's preference for other renderings over Goldingay's versions, he does provide a translation that is very close to the Hebrew text (even when that leads to awkwardness). Some of his translation choices are fresh, enlightening, and could be considered an improvement to modern translations. For example, Goldin-

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12   See Philip Nel, "šlm," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012): 130–35.

13   Most interpreters think *ḥeseḏ* means something like "covenant faithfulness," but some have argued for the one-word translation of "loyalty." For example, see Tobias Houston, "Towards redeeming 'loyalty' in functionalist Bible translation using the Hebrew *ḥeseḏ* concept," *HTS* 79.2 (2023): 1–6.

William Bowes, Review Article | RA5
'An Evaluation of the Recent Bible Translations
by Goldingay (2018) and McKnight (2023)'

gay tends to translate *nep̄eš* as "entire being" (rather than "soul," as in most translations) which I consider an improvement that leads to many interesting readings (like Ps. 42, for example [p. 547–8]. Ultimately, I conclude that Goldingay's readings will appeal to a more educated reader, with some knowledge of Hebrew, who prefers a translation that prizes functional equivalence. However, lay readers with less education or more experience with interpretive translations will find it difficult. With these comments in mind, I turn now to McKnight's translation of the New Testament.

III. MCKNIGHT'S NEW TESTAMENT: METHOD AND EXAMPLES

From his preface, McKnight promises that his work "is unlike any translation that you have seen," and that his translation "will do its best to make the text sound more like the Greek original, and sometimes it will not sound all that English-y" (p. v). From the beginning, therefore, McKnight outlines his aim as one of functional equivalence to the furthest extent. Similar to Goldingay, McKnight insists on transliterating names and places in a way that requires some adjustment from the reader (e.g., he writes out "Yeirosoluma" instead of "Jerusalem," and "Yesous" instead of "Jesus"). Such choices do make for slow reading, but McKnight is correct in that they capture the Greek – even if awkwardly at times. McKnight does take some liberties with the Greek depending on the situation (he sometimes omits the Greek *kai* – often rendered "and"). He also – and intentionally – avoids common theological terms that may have become rather "loaded" for readers; for example, he prefers "deliverance" over "salvation," and "devoted" over "holy".

Like Goldingay, McKnight has concise initial introductions for each book where he notes themes, structure, and important background, without getting into more controversial issues like the Synoptic problem or texts with disputed authorship.

Some of McKnight's renderings are peculiar, and even though they are not inaccurate, they suggest varying degrees of interpretive freedom. For example, rather than "law" (Gk. *nomos*) he prefers "covenant code." Some of the more interesting changes that McKnight makes are paratextual; he frequently organizes texts in a fresh way on the page. In Paul's letters, for example, he puts questions in bold print and organizes them differently than other modern translations. Take 1 Cor 7:27 as an illustration (p. 181):

Have you been bound to a woman?
Don't pursue loosening.

Have you been released from a woman?
Don't pursue a woman.

Other structural or organizational changes are more subtle. For example, many modern translations (like the ESV) have a paragraph break between Eph 5:21 and 5:22, but McKnight does not separate the text here (p. 211). He does include headlines before major divisions in the text or the author's argument, and these are usually short and simple (like before Eph 6:10 he has the headline "God's protective armor" [p. 211]). Another choice that McKnight makes that I appreciated is that he does not translate passages that are known to be widely doubted (like Mk 16:9–20 or Jn 7:53–8:11). Those were simply removed.

As I did with Goldingay's translation, in order to elucidate McKnight's method I will include a few examples of his translation alongside the NIV (2011) as well as Hart's rendering (2017) in order to illustrate different approaches to translation. The Greek (Nestle-Aland, 28th edition) is in-

cluded to show the basis for each translation, with particular portions in bold for comparison.

Luke 6:20

NA28: *kai autos eparas tous ophthalmous autou eis tous mathētas autou elegen· makarioi oi ptōchoi, oti umetera estin ē basileia tou theou.*

NIV: Looking at his disciples, he said: "**Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.**"

Hart: And he, raising his eyes to his disciples, said: "**How blissful the destitute, for yours is the Kingdom of God**" (p. 118).

McKnight: He, lifting his eyes up toward his Apprentices, was saying, "**God blesses the beggars because yours is God's Empire**." (p. 69)

McKnight departs from most modern translations in this verse, but not radically. At its *most literal*, the Greek *basileia* is probably closest to "empire," though most readers would not be used to this terminology. While some changes (like rendering "disciples" as "apprentices") are simple and thought-provoking, others (like the use of the word "beggars," with its various cultural connotations) may be more unnecessarily interpretive.

1 Timothy 2:11–15

NA28: *gunē en ēsuchia manthanetō en pasē upotagē· didaskein de gunaiki ouk epitrepō oude authentein andros, all einai en ēsuchia. adam gar prōtos eplasthē, eita eua. kai adam ouk ēpatēthē, ē de gunē exapatētheisa en parabasei gegonen· sōthēsetai de dia tēs teknogonias, ean meinōsin en pistei kai agape kai agiasmō meta sōphrosunēs.*

NIV: **A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man**; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Hart: **Let a wife learn in quietude, in all orderly compliance; But I entrust it to a wife neither to teach nor to wield authority over her husband**, but to abide in quietude, Because Adam was formed first, then Eve, And Adam was not deceived; rather the woman, being deceived, came to be in transgression; But she will be saved through the bearing of children, if they abide with temperance in faith and love and holiness (p. 417–18).

McKnight: **Let a woman, in silence, be apprenticed in complete under-ordering. It isn't appropriate for a woman to teach, nor to overwhelm a man**, but to be [learning] in silence. (For Adam was formed first, then Heua [Eve], and Adam was not deceived by the woman, being deceived, was in violation, but she will be delivered through giving-a-child-a-life if they remain in the faith and in love and in devotion with prudence.') (p. 232–33)

Readers sensitive to the difficulty of this text can appreciate with McKnight is trying to do in this translation. Even so, there is admittedly some stretching of the language here that not everyone will appreciate (whether due to aesthetics or theological implications). Small alterations in segmentation (like the use of parenthesis) create a unique way of reading this text and function to reorganize the flow of thought in a way that is quite thought-provoking. While this is truly a unique reading that could inspire further study, it is questionable whether this translation necessarily *clarifies* this complex text. Even so, as with Goldingay's transla-

William Bowes, Review Article | RA7
'An Evaluation of the Recent Bible Translations
by Goldingay (2018) and McKnight (2023'

tion, McKnight's work would appeal to a more educated reader, especially one who is willing to part with many of the paratextual features of modern translations to which we all have grown accustomed.

IV. THE IMPACT OF THESE TRANSLATIONS AND THE FUTURE OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

For readers with some open-mindedness and a penchant for functional equivalence, Goldingay and McKnight have produced excellent translations. In my opinion, they would be best suited for a more educated reader, or a reader with some basic knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, although their usefulness is not limited to a select few. Evangelical readers will appreciate the fact that these translations are written by scholars who profess a very high view of Scripture. That is, from their respective prefaces both translators presume the text to be the infallible revelation of God and are motivated by a desire to elucidate the sacred text for readers in a way that is close to the original language. While their work is admirable and helpful, readers should expect to struggle with some of the choices that were made, especially if a reader has favored one translation for a long period. There is a "learning curve" when it comes to reading these translations. They are best read slowly, as a supplement.

In the world of Bible translation, it is quite difficult to do something new. However, I think that Goldingay and McKnight have provided something genuinely different that is worth considering. The readings in these translations can be clunky at times, but they succeed in giving readers something if a clearer window into a less "filtered" text. The less "filtered" text is not a text without any interpretation, but it is a text that can help to appreciate just how eclectic the biblical text can be and how much interpreta-

tion goes into many of the choices made by modern translators. In Goldingay's case, his close attention to the nuances of the Hebrew provides a different lens through which to read familiar texts like Genesis 1 and Psalm 1. In McKnight's case, his creativity in rendering Greek phraseology also provides new ways to read especially difficult texts like 1 Timothy 2:11–15. A feature I would have liked to see is for the translators to include just a few more footnotes (otherwise very minimal in the text) about why they made certain translation choices or alternative possibilities they might consider for a word or phrase. As it stands, however, these would be a worthy complement to a serious Bible reader's library.