

My Response to Edward D. Andrews on Translating Genesis 1:1

Description

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Yesterday, Edward D. Andrews of christianpublishinghouse.co posted an article “to take on” my recent [blog post](#) and [podcast](#) “Genesis 1:1 – In What Beginning?!” The rest of this blog post will be my response to his article. (You can read his article [here](#).)

Hello Edward Andrews (may I call you Edward?),

First, thank you for reading my blog post, replying, and of course, letting me know about your reply. I’ve read your article and would like to address some of the issues you raised, but more importantly, I hope to do everything I can to bring about clear and positive communication between us. Even if we disagree on some things, there is no reason why we can’t do so in a friendly manner, each seeking to accurately understand one another. Successful conversation requires courtesy, but it also requires taking pains to hear each other out. From your article, it appears that you have misunderstood me in several ways. I’m not saying you did this on purpose – misunderstandings happen. But I do ask that you grant me the opportunity to clarify my position and that you sincerely consider my clarifications just as much you would want someone to do for you in a circumstance in which you have been misunderstood.

Clearly, your article wasn’t just a response to my blog post; you also respond to an article by Bill Mounce and your response to both of us fits within the larger goal of your article – addressing translation philosophy. I’d like to ask you to consider how your broader goal may have impacted how you understood and used my blog post. You describe two translation philosophies – one being literal and the other being interpretive (which you link with dynamic equivalent translation). And you say, “The way Mr. Wilde is recommending to translate the passage is an interpretive way.” This is generally how you portray my approach to translation, as though I promote a less literal, interpretive, dynamic-equivalence type translational method.

I suppose this brings us to the first thing I need to clarify: the issues you are addressing in your article are not the issues I was addressing in my [blog post](#). With this in mind, I ask that you re-read my [blog post](#). As I think should be clear, I’m not addressing translation philosophy, nor am I in that post recommending a certain way to translate Genesis 1:1. Instead, I’m considering two basic translations of the verse – neither of which are my translations, and I take note of the differences between their nuances and then compare them with the Hebrew to see which nuances more accurately reflect the Hebrew text. And both translations I consider are actually quite literal word-for-word translations of Genesis 1:1. In both cases, the English words map easily and directly onto the Hebrew words, which is quite different from the interpretive translations Leland Ryken discussed in what you quoted from him. For example, he referred to the Good News Bible’s

rendering of Psalm 23:5b: “you welcome me as an honored guest,” as opposed to the more literal translation, “you anoint my head with oil.” There are certainly interpretive translations of Genesis 1:1. For example, to use the Good News Bible translation again, “In the beginning, when God created the universe.” Or, even further from a literal translation, the Message Bible, which reads, “First this: God created the Heavens and Earth – all you see, and all you don’t see.” Considering the value of the translation philosophy behind translations like this is a conversation worth having, but it just isn’t the conversation I was engaged in in my blog post. Instead, I was comparing the nuances of two quite literal translations.

The next thing I need to clarify is what my translation philosophy actually is. So, here it is – or at least those parts of it that are most relevant to your article. When I translate a passage, I take it as my primary responsibility to give the English reader the information they need to understand what the Hebrew text says. Generally speaking, I think this is best accomplished by word-for-word translation, though of course, it isn’t infrequent for one Hebrew word to require several English words to represent it, as I know you know. Thus, it might be more precise for me to say that I think each grammatical element in Hebrew should be represented in English in a straightforward way. So, as an example, I noticed that the Updated American Standard Version (which I understand you to be the chief translator of) renders the last part of Genesis 1:1 as “the heavens and the earth.” As you know, in Hebrew, both “heavens” and “earth ” have the definite article, which you represent by the word “the.” And the word translated “heavens” is plural – which you correctly represent with an “s.” Many translations – even literal translations, don’t represent all of these grammatical elements, even though they are present in the Hebrew text. I think they should be represented in translation, and I’m glad to see that your translation does this. These aspects of the Hebrew are more accurately captured in your translation than in Robert Alter’s translation, for example – and I think that’s a real plus.

So, in [my previous blog post](#), when I said, “This aspect is more clearly captured by the JPS and Robert Alter translations,” I wasn’t saying that these two translations provide a better interpretation of the overall meaning of Genesis 1:1. I’m saying that they more accurately represent certain grammatical aspects of the Hebrew text as compared to the KJV-style translation. If you take my comments as a friendly critique of the KJV-style translation, the root of my critique is actually that there are grammatical elements of the Hebrew text that it fails to represent to its English readers. In Hebrew, Genesis 1:1 isn’t a complete sentence, but instead only the beginning of a sentence that goes on into the next verse. This should be represented to English readers. But of course, the part I focused on the most is the fact that bereshit is in a construct state. This is a grammatical aspect of the Hebrew that is not represented in the translation “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The translation “When God began to create heaven and earth” more accurately conveys the fact that the text speaks of the beginning “of” God creating, rather than “the beginning” – full stop. “When God began to create heaven and earth” isn’t how I would translate Genesis 1:1 – but it contains a reasonable attempt to represent the construct state of bereshit. I will say, though, that I prefer how Young’s Literal Translation does it: “In the beginning of God’s preparing the heavens and the earth.” To be clear, I don’t think this is perfect either, but it does a good job of representing the construct state of bereshit. And in doing so, it translates Genesis 1:1 more literally than the KJV and the translations that follow it. Young’s Literal Translation also more accurately reflects the grammar of the Hebrew in that it presents Genesis 1:1 as only the beginning of a sentence. From this, I hope you can see that the issues I discussed in my blog post are not a matter of literal versus interpretive translation – it is a matter of which

literal translation most accurately represents the Hebrew – and on which aspects. This is what I meant by saying there is no one right way to translate. Your translation (the UASV) more accurately captures certain aspects of the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 as compared to JPS-1985 and Robert Alter’s translation – particularly in the latter half of the verse – but their translations also more accurately convey certain aspects that aren’t usually captured in English translations, such as the relationship between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 and the construct state of bereshit (which Young’s Literal Translation captures even better).

There are plenty of other details of what you said that we could discuss, but my goal isn’t to chronicle ways you got me wrong. My goal really is to do what I can to bring about a clear and respectful understanding between us. The only other aspect I can think of that I should comment on in hopes of accomplishing this end is this: Early in your comments on my blog post you said, “When the author says that the above literal translation is the **traditional** way of translating [Genesis 1:1](#), he is inferring that it is wrong, and really misrepresenting the translation philosophy being used. It isn’t the traditional way of translating, it is the **literal way** of translating.” So, I wanted to go back to my statement to see if I worded things in a way that was prone to this misunderstanding, and to my surprise, I actually didn’t say that this (the KJV-style translation) is the “traditional” way of translating Genesis 1:1 (the words “tradition” and “traditional” actually don’t occur in my [blog post](#) or [podcast episode](#)). I wouldn’t be opposed to saying that, but the words I actually used were: “It’s certainly how the vast majority of English translations have done it since [Wycliffe’s translation](#) back in the 14th century. But, of course, the fact that something is standard doesn’t mean it is correct.” My meaning here is that “In the beginning God, etc.” is the most widely adopting way of translating the opening of Genesis. Even though I didn’t use the word “traditional,” if I had chosen that word, this would be my intended meaning – I wouldn’t mean “traditional” in the sense of “the mere traditions of man.” If I had conveyed that meaning, I can see how you could think I was implying that it is wrong. But in all sincerity, I was just saying that it is the standard translation, and by pointing that out, I wasn’t trying to imply that it is therefore wrong. I would say, “and darkness was upon the face of the deep” is the standard or “traditional” translation of the second line of Genesis 1:2, and yet I think that is an excellent translation. The point I was making is that the mere fact of something being standard isn’t evidence that it is correct; in other words, we can’t assume its correctness on the basis that it is standard. If it is correct, that has to be established on the basis of the Hebrew text. This is why I spent the rest of the post examining how the standard translation and an alternative translation compare to the Hebrew.

Anyway, I genuinely hope this has helped to clarify my position, and I hope you can see that we are actually in more agreement on some things than it may have appeared at first. Thanks for taking the time to read my response, and I hope you and yours are doing well in these strange days.