

Cheers for the man who... – “Psalm 1” (NABT)

Description

Trent Wilde Blog

Cheers for the man who...

Most translations blur distinctions between words.

...stuff about **language** and **translation principles**.

What about male-centric language?

Should words be translated consistently?

Content Words vs. Function Words



Not A Bible Translation
of the poem now known
as "Psalm 1"

quite different, and English speakers regularly choose one over the others because of those nuances. Imagine that you write a short story, and then someone translates it into another language, but they do this by taking a cluster of words in the other language that share the same general notion (ways of moving from one place to another) and then mix and match them when translating your English story. In some places where you had the word *walked*, they used a word that meant something closer to *ran*, and in some places where you had the word *arrived*, they used a word that means something closer to *went*, and they did this with no consistency. I'm sure you would recognize that that wouldn't be the greatest translation. But this is done all the time when translating ancient Hebrew texts into English. I think this is just not cool, and it results in distorting the nuances of what the authors were communicating. This is the basic reason why I wouldn't translate both *ashrei* and *barukh* with the same English word.

Thankfully, there's a solution, even though, granted, it takes more time and effort. Basically, it comes down to carefully studying each word cluster in order to find which English term most closely matches which Hebrew term and then maintaining consistency in translating them. This preserves the distinctions.

Function

Another issue with translating *ashrei* as either "blessed" or "happy" is that you end up with a sentence structure like "blessed is the man," in which the first word, "blessed" or "happy," is most naturally interpreted as an adjective describing the man. In reality, the Hebrew word isn't an adjective and the clause isn't a description. The word *ashrei* is a plural noun that is used as a positive exclamation, more like "cheers!" and "congrats!" in English. And out of these two, "cheers" is closer to the meaning of *ashrei* in that it's a more general term, while "congrats" is usually reserved more for accomplishments or major joyous events.

"Happy is the man" might sound like the focus is on the person's emotional state. "Blessed is the man" could come across as describing the person's state or, if you take it as a passive verb, it could seem like the focus is on the act of the person being blessed by another. In reality, *ashrei* is an exclamation expressing the positive attitude of the speaker regarding the one being spoken about. This is more accurately conveyed by "Cheers for the man."

Root Consistency

Whenever possible, I think it's important to not only maintain consistency when translating a word but also when translating a collection of words that share the same root. For example, the words *nation*, *national*, and *nationalize* would ideally be translated into another language using words that share a common root in that language as part of maintaining consistency and seeing the connection between the different words based on the same root. And very often, words that stem from the same root share a common meaning, as in the example I just gave.

So, when considering the first word of Psalm 1, *ashrei*, I didn't just consider this word but also the other words that share its root in order to see if there is a root in English that could be consistently applied to all the occurrences of the Hebrew root. For example, there is a verb based on this root, and it turns out it means something like "to cheer." For example, Malachi 3:12 says, "all of the nations will cheer y'all as y'all will do y'all's thing as a land of delight." And Proverbs 31:28 says about the virtuous woman that "her sons will stand up and cheer her." Again, "cheer" in these

verses is the verb based on the same root as *ashrei* in Psalm 1:1. So, any time you read *cheer* or *cheers* in Not A Bible Translation, you can know it's being used to translate this root and any time this root occurs, it will be translated with a word recognizably related to the word cheer, whether it is a noun, verb, or an adjective like cheerful.

A Side Note On Consistency – What I've said about consistently using the same English word to translate every instance of a given Hebrew word deserves some qualification. Sometimes, a single Hebrew word must be translated using more than one English word, even in a single instance, in order to capture the idea. For example, I translate *olam* as "ineffable time." I mention this in order to make it clear that my point isn't about numerical equivalence (1 word for 1 word); it is about consistency in multiple instances of the same word are translated. That said, there are also exceptions to this. There are certain Hebrew words that have multiple meanings, and sometimes there is no English word with that same multiplicity of meanings. As an example, *nefesh* sometimes means *throat* and sometimes means *body*. If we had an English word that carried both meanings, I would use that English word, but I have not been able to find any such English word so I am left with translating it as "throat" in some instances and "body" in others.

There is also a certain type of word that I'm not attempting to translate in a way that always uses the same English word across all instances. What I'm referring to is a category of words called "function words" (also called "grammatical words"). There are two main categories of words: function words and content words. Content words serve the purpose of carrying their own meaning. They include word classes like nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Function words, on the other hand, serve primarily grammatical functions and include word classes like conjunctions and prepositions. All languages have many more content words than function words, though function words tend to be used very frequently since they are an important part of structuring the grammar of language.

Since the primary purpose of function words is, well, function, I shoot for translating them with English words and structures that create an equivalent function rather than treating them as content words that might have an equivalent content word in English. If there happens to be an English function word that closely corresponds to a Hebrew function word, then great! But that can't be counted on with function words. Languages tend to be similar to each other when it comes to content words, but they can be quite different from each other when it comes to grammar (including function words). The reason content words are more similar across languages is that most humans tend to categorize the world in roughly the same ways. Most languages use a single word as a label for our four-legged barking friends and a different word for our four-legged meowing friends. I don't think there is any language that categorizes them in a different way, like having one word for large four-legged barkers and a different word for small four-legged barkers together with all four-legged meowers. So, much of the time, a Hebrew content word will have an equivalent English content word, even though they are unlikely to be exact synonyms in all their nuances.

Grammar, though, is far more complicated and differs more widely between languages. Prepositions, for example, don't follow straightforward rules of logic or consistency. In English, you "get *on* a bus" but "get *in* a car." You travel *by* foot or *on* foot, and either way, it's the same, but you can only say you travel "*by* boat" – you can't say you travel "*on* boat"

(on a boat is okay, but not “on boat” like people travel “on foot”). You can say you’ll close *up* the store at night, or you can say you’ll close *down* the store at night, and in spite of the fact that up and down are supposed to be opposites, these expressions mean the same thing. These peculiarities are language specific. Each language has its own weirdness with grammar (including function words), but the oddness of each language is unique, and thus, it’s normal to be unable to find word-for-word matches for function words between two languages.

To summarize this side note on consistency – I aim to translate Hebrew content words with the closest English terms I can, and I aim to translate Hebrew function words and grammar with English words and grammar that serve as close to the same function as possible. And I try to do both with consistency.

So, all of these principles have led me to translate *ashrei* as “cheers” since it allows for maintaining distinctions between *ashrei* and other Hebrew terms, it also more accurately reflects its use as a positive exclamation rather than an adjective, and it allows for a consistent translation of the root.

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The word *ish* is a very common word in Hebrew. One of the biggest decisions a translator has to make with this term is whether to translate it as “man” or as something more gender-neutral like “person.” I certainly see the arguments for translating it as “person” since, in many cases (including here in “Psalm 1”), it isn’t at all trying to specify males but is just referring to “a person” in general, regardless of their gender. “Man” in English used to be used far more commonly to refer to any person regardless of gender, but English is shifting away from this usage. This is part of a broader trend toward gender-inclusive language – a change that I embrace. Why should the generic/default person be spoken of as male? And why not include non-masculine pronouns when speaking of hypothetical individuals? And using “they” and “their” as a gender-inclusive way of referring to an individual – I’m all for it!

So then, why do I translate *ish* as man? The reason is that I don’t believe my task as a translator should be to conform the text to my own ideals. I embrace and use gender-inclusive language, and I’m glad that English is shifting to this usage more and more. But the fact of the matter is that ancient Hebrew was a language that regularly used masculine language as the default. If we translate ancient Hebrew texts into gender-inclusive English, we make it appear as though ancient Israelite society was more socially progressive in its language than it really was. I don’t think masking the male bias in the language is the right solution, linguistically or socially. In order to understand these writings as fully as possible, it’s essential to understand as much about the world in which they were produced as we can – and that world was one in which male-centric language was the norm.

That said, it’s also important to realize that the masculine default in ancient Hebrew was by no means unique and Israelite society was no more male-centric than other ancient societies (and some modern societies, for that matter). Imagining that ancient Israel was more patriarchal than it was can be just as harmful as imagining that it was less patriarchal than it was (by playing into

antisemitic tropes, for example). It's also important to realize that the prominence of generic masculine language in ancient Hebrew tells us more about ancient Israelite society at large than about the perspectives of individual authors. An individual can live in a society whose language is biased toward masculinity, and that individual may use that language and yet may not embrace male-supremacist ideology. They may be subconsciously influenced by it, and they may be blind to its true nature, but nonetheless, their use of it doesn't indicate their conscious endorsement of it; it may simply be the water in which they swim. In English, before there was a movement toward gender-inclusive language, most people just used terms like "man" and "mankind" to refer to all humans without even thinking about it. This was true even of those who believed in gender equality.

The word *ish* in ancient Hebrew was indeed the typical term for an adult male. As an example, Genesis 2:24 says, "a man (*ish*) leaves his father and his mother and clings to his woman (*isha*)." So we have the masculine term "*ish*" (man) and the feminine term "*isha*" (woman). *Ish* here can't be translated in a gender-neutral way like "person" without causing problems with translating the word *isha*. And this is just one example among many where *ish* is used for an adult male. Yet, there are also many examples where it is used of any person regardless of gender. In fact, it should usually be understood as generic unless something in the context specifies that it refers to males – like contrasting it with *isha* or another female-specific term. But the fact that it's a generic masculine term includes the fact that it is a masculine term – not a gender-neutral term. This is one reason why "man" is a good translation. It is generally understood to be a male term and yet it can be used as a generic masculine. Another reason why "man" is a good translation is that it isn't always used as a generic masculine – sometimes it really is trying to specify males – so if one wants to translate *ish* consistently, they can't use a gender-neutral term.

In *Cheers For The Man* (Psalm 1), the use is generic and includes anyone regardless of gender. The language itself has a male bias, but the author's *use* of the language is gender-inclusive. Both realities are important to be aware of.

••x©x•x• Who

The last word we'll consider is *asher*, which is the main relative pronoun in ancient Hebrew. As such, it's a function word, not a content word. In English, we have a number of words that can function as relative pronouns, including *who*, *which*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *that*. The general function that we employ by using this variety of terms in English was employed in ancient Hebrew by the use of this one word: *asher*. In other words, ancient Hebrew didn't have separate relative pronouns corresponding to modern English relative pronouns. Instead, what we do with many words, ancient Hebrew did with one. Because of this, *asher* can't be translated in every instance as "who" or "that" or any other English relative pronoun. It would be nice, but as discussed above, we shouldn't expect that sort of consistency with function words. Instead, we should expect functional consistency. The function is to introduce a relative clause – that's what relative pronouns do. So in translating *asher*, my goal is to consistently use English words and structures that employ this function. In this line of *Cheers For The Man*, the appropriate English relative pronoun is *who*; later, in the last line of verse 3, it's *that*.

So, this has been pretty heavy on language and translation principles. I hope you can see how important these principles are and how much the principles by which a translator operates can impact the resultant translation, with the potential to either reflect or misconstrue the text.

Here's a brief recap of the principles we covered that are used in *Not A Bible Translation*:

1. Groups of words that share a similar meaning shouldn't be translated in a way that obscures the distinctions between the words. Instead, each Hebrew word in a semantic cluster should be reflected by an English word or expression that matches its range of meaning most closely. Once that word or expression is found, it's important to be consistent with translating every instance of the Hebrew word with its English counterpart. When this is impossible due to the Hebrew word having a range of meanings broader than any one English word, it is necessary to have more than one English counterpart, each for a certain subset of the instances of the Hebrew word. Even so, the Hebrew should be consistently translated using these English counterparts, and these English counterparts should be used only for this Hebrew word. This works to maintain the distinctions between terms, and it thus respects the nuances of what the ancient author was communicating.
2. If a word or phrase functions a certain way in Hebrew, its translation should function in the same way. For example, a Hebrew exclamation should be reflected in translation by an English exclamation rather than changing it to a descriptive phrase.
3. Whenever possible, words that share a root in Hebrew should be translated by words that share a root in English. So far, I've been finding this to be possible for many more roots than one would assume based on practices common in bible translation.
4. Content words tend to be more similar across languages than function words and grammar. Because of this, while it is common to find generally equivalent content words between two languages, it is less common to find equivalent function words. This, together with the fact that the main purpose of content words is **content** and the main purpose of function words is **function**, leads me to translate content words with content consistency and function words (and grammar) with functional consistency.
5. My task as a translator is to reflect the original text as fully as possible. This includes refraining from conforming the language to my own ideals. When generic/default masculine language is used in a Hebrew text, I reflect that in English translation. It would be a mistake to interpret this male-centric aspect of the language as a male-specific assertion by the author. Male-centric generic language tells us more about the society than about the individual author, especially since generic masculine language leaves the door open to gender-inclusive communication even while embedding those communications in a male-biased linguistic system.

When I apply these principles to the ancient Hebrew poem now known as "Psalm 1," the resultant translation of the first line is,

Cheers for the man whoâ?!

Obviously, this isn't a complete thought. Next time, we'll see the first aspect of what it is that this person does that the author of this poem considered worthy of his cheers.

Lastly, you probably noticed the podcast player at the top of this page. If you haven't already, I recommend listening to the podcast – it contains some details not included in this post. Also, if

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