

## Translating Liturgy<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

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Translations are always approximations. This is in part because of the differences among languages themselves. Furthermore, all translation is interpretation; in a sense, there is no such thing as a literal translation. In fact, the greater the translator's knowledge of the relevant languages, the greater the difficulty of translating. There is also the problem of determining the connotation of words in languages that are no longer spoken. Yet accurate translations are important, for liturgical worship is one of the principal ways of transmitting tradition to ordinary believers. In translating liturgy, one must be attentive not only to the biblical origins of liturgical texts, but to their sources in the writings of the Church Fathers. Due attention to these sources will require preparation of concordances and scholarly editing of texts.



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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first read to the annual conference of the Fellowship of SS. Alban and Sergius at Chester on 17 August 1995. I have retained much of the oral style of the original and added some further points raised in subsequent discussion. Biblical references in English to the Old Testament follow the Greek numbering, not the Hebrew. This means that in most cases the Psalm numbers are one less than those in most English versions. For citations from the Hebrew Bible, the numbering follows that in the Masoretic text.

Zeal to promote the common good, whether it be by devising any thing ourselves, or revising that which has been laboured by others, deserveth certainly much respect and esteem, but yet findeth but cold entertainment in the world. It is welcomed with suspicion instead of love, and with emulation instead of thanks: and if there be any hole for cavil to enter, (and cavil, if it do not find an hole, will make one) it is sure to be misconstrued, and in danger to be condemned. This will easily be granted by as many as know story, or have any experience. For was there ever any thing projected, that savoured any way of newness or renewing, but the same endured many a storm of gainsaying, or opposition?<sup>2</sup>

When I was originally asked to give this paper, the title proposed to me was 'Translating the Liturgy,' but I demurred, and suggested that the definite article be omitted and the title be simply 'Translating Liturgy.' The point that I was making, that I wished to broaden the scope of my talk to include other texts than the Orthodox Eucharistic Liturgy alone, will be clear to speakers of English. But the point could not so easily be made, if at all, in Latin or Russian, which have no definite article. This brings me at once to the first thing I want to say about translations: they are always approximations, always no more than attempts to convey in the grammar, idiom and vocabulary of one language what was originally expressed in those of another. I would like to illustrate this by looking at the opening verse of St. John's Gospel.

Here it is in the Greek original, the Latin Vulgate and, in English, in the New Revised Standard Version and Revised English Bible:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Translators to the Reader* [King James, or Authorised, Version, 1611].

<sup>3</sup> The following abbreviations are used in the various examples:  
 ASB = Alternative Service Book [1970]; AV = Authorised Version; ELLC = English Language Liturgical Commission,  
 ERM = English Roman Missal [1970]; FRM = French

GNT Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

VUL In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum.

NRSV In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

REB In the beginning the Word already was. The Word was in God's presence, and what God was, the Word was.

Note that Latin, together with Slavonic and Russian, cannot preserve the distinction in the Greek between the word 'God' with and without the definite article, since they have no definite article. English and French, on the other hand, do not normally use the article with proper names and so they too are unable, without considerable paraphrase, to preserve the distinction either. The Latin could equally well be rendered, 'and God was the Word.' The English too could be understood as identifying the Word with God. Origen, however, in his commentary on St. John's Gospel, points out that there is a distinct difference between ὁ θεός and θεός.<sup>4</sup>

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Roman Missal [1972], [these are the official translations of the *Missale Romanum* issued by Pope Paul VI in 1969]; GNT = Greek New Testament [as found in modern scholarly editions]; LIT ENG = Official Translation of the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain, [1995]; LXX = Greek Septuagint [3rd century BCE]; MT = Masoretic Hebrew Text [the standard Rabbinic text of the Bible]; NRSV = New Revised Standard Version [1989]; REB = Revised English Bible [1989]; TR = Textus Receptus [roughly speaking the standard Byzantine Greek text of the New Testament, still used by the Orthodox Churches and the one underlying the older English versions, such as the AV]; VUL = Latin Vulgate [4th century For the view of the second Vatican Council on this and the LXX, see the Council's decree *Dei Verbum* §22].

<sup>4</sup> Cf. his commentary II.2, where he writes 'He [St. John] puts the article when the appellation "God" refers to the uncreated cause of all things; he omits it when the Word is named "God".'