Are There Literal Translations? (continued exchange with Edward D. Andrews)

Description

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This post continues an exhange Iâ??ve been having with Edward D. Andrews regarding translating Genesis 1:1 and translation philosophy. You can read our exchange in order by following these links: [my original post](#) > [his blog post replying to my original post](#) > [my reply](#) > his comment (scroll down to the comments section in the last link) > and then my next response is what you can read below.

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Hi Edward ð???

I hope youâ??re doing well since our last exchange. First, I want to express that I appreciate you saying that you may have mistaken my intended purpose. It never bodes well when someone is unwilling to consider the possibility that they may have mistaken the meaning of their conversation partner. Itâ??s just such a normal thing to happen, especially when two people are only beginning to interact. I certainly donâ??t take misunderstandings personally or regard it as an offense. While Iâ??ll try my best to understand you accurately, thereâ??s always a chance that Iâ??ll misunderstand something you say, so if that happens at any point, please feel free to let me know and to clarify your meaning.

Okay, so to the subject of literal translation: In your comment on [my previous blog post](#), you mentioned that if two translations are literal, they should read the same. Specifically, you said, â??Now, both are not literal translations. If both were literal translations; then, they would read the same.â?• Iâ??m not entirely sure what you mean by this. On the surface, it sounds like youâ??re saying that if two translations differ in their wording, they canâ??t both be literal translations. But this would imply that there can only be one literal translation, which isnâ??t the impression Iâ??ve been getting from other things youâ??ve said. For example, in [your article](#) responding to [my original post on Genesis](#), you identified several translations that you consider â??literal translations.â?• The list you gave is: KJV, YLT, ASV, RSV, NASB, UASV. Now, obviously, these translations are not exactly the same. Their wordings differ from one another on numerous occasions. Maybe in your comment, you were using the word â??literalâ?• in a more strict sense. If thatâ??s the case, Iâ??m totally fine with it, so long as we also keep in mind that you use it in a less strict sense as well since you list several translations that differ from one another as being â??literal translations.â?•

When I said in [my response to you](#) that both translations I compared in [my original post](#) were â??quite literal word-for-word translations of Genesis 1:1,â?• I was using the word â??literalâ?• in a sense more akin to how you used it in [your blog post](#). In other words, I was using it in a sense that allows for differences in wording. Why do I consider both translations of Genesis 1:1 to be â??quite

literalâ?•? Probably for the same reason you consider both the KJV and Youngâ??s Literal Translation to be literal even though theyâ??re quite different. Hereâ??s how I put it in my last post: â??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.â?•

Here are the English words of the JPS and Robert Alter translations mapped onto the Hebrew words: (For those of you who arenâ??t familiar with Hebrew, the word order might seem really weird, but thatâ??s just because Hebrew sentences arrange words in a different order from English. Also, I arranged the words left to right as English does rather than right to left as it is in Hebrew.)

When began	to create	God	heaven	and earth
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My point here isnâ??t to say that this is the best translation (I myself would translate it differently, as I mentioned in my last post). Iâ??ve mapped the words here just to illustrate what I meant by saying itâ??s a â??quite literal word-for-wordâ?• translation. But as I also said in my last post, I prefer Youngâ??s Literal Translation here: â??In the beginning of Godâ??s preparing the heavens and the earth â?? the earth hath existed waste and voidâ?¦â?• etc. Since you acknowledge this as a literal translation, Iâ??d point you to it over the JPS and Robert Alter translations. Youngâ??s Literal Translation accurately translates the two elements that were the main point of my original post on this topic; namely, that the first word of the Hebrew text is in a construct state and Genesis 1:1 is not a complete sentence. I agree with you that wording matters and that it impacts the meaning of a text. Saying â??in the beginningâ?• conveys a different meaning than â??in the beginning of,â?• which is why knowing that â??in the beginning ofâ?• more literally and accurately translates the Hebrew text is so important.

Iâ??m sure we could go back and forth discussing whether, or in what sense, a given translation might be â??literal,â?• but honestly, that isnâ??t what Iâ??m wanting to focus on. As I said in my original post, the only way to really measure to what extent a translation is accurate is to compare it to the original. Since weâ??re discussing its meaning in English, translation is inevitably involved, but still, my focus is on the the meaning of the original as it was even before the English language came into existance. The original says: ×?Ö°Ö¼×¼×¨Öµ×•×©Öµ×•×?×ª ×?Ö¸Ö¼×¼×¨Ö¸×• ×• Ö±×?Ö¹×?×?Ö´×• ×•Öµ×ª ×•Ö•×©Ö¸Ö¼×¼×•×ª ×•Ö•×©Ö¸×• ×?Ö°×•Öµ×ª ×?Ö¸×•Ö¸×¨Ö¶×¥

Is this refering to an ultimate origin that it calls â??the beginningâ?• and saying that during that beginning, God created the heavens and the earth? Or, is it refering to the beginning of God creating the heavens and the earth and saying (in verse 2) what it was like at the start of that process? This question can be answered without considering any translation or translation philosophy. The author knew what he was saying and the original audience understood it â?? all purely in Hebrew. And again, in Hebrew, the answer is clear: it refers to the beginning of God creating the heavens and the earth, and verse two is saying what things were like at the beginning of that process.

When it comes to translating this passage into English, the translation should inform the reader of the facts of the Hebrew text, including <u>these</u> facts.

I had considered making an additional post addressing something else you said in your comment, but conversations that go in multiple directions at once can be hard to keep track of. Plus, I try to find the most fruitful direction for discussion and, since this is a public blog, one that will be of benefit to the readers.