

The SSRA translation

Where other translations are offered primarily as study texts, or to be read alone at home, the SSRA translation is offered specifically for reading aloud: to be easy on the eye, and on the voice, for the reader, so that the reader can read with confidence; and to be easy on the ear, for the hearer, who should be able to follow the reading – and indeed be drawn in by the reading – without needing a printed text, even on first hearing. The text carefully avoids unnecessary stumbling blocks, for the reader; and for the hearer, aims to deliver the full meaning of each passage in language which is clear, timeless, dignified, and, where appropriate, even poetic.

To assist the reader, the layout on the page is in short lines, with key words given special prominence. But other features of the translation also make the Old Testament and Epistle readings, in particular, more accessible for the specific context of reading aloud.

Some Old Testament readings are straightforward narratives – but many others are complex poetry, full of unfamiliar imagery, and switching repeatedly between past, present and future tenses, and with God as ‘God’ in the last verse, ‘you’ in this verse, and ‘I’ in the next. These may have been well-recognised and well-understood poetic techniques in Hebrew culture, but they do not translate effectively word-for-word into texts that are easy to follow when read aloud in modern English. SSRA untangles these ‘changes of person’, and changes of tense, into texts that are faithful to the original meaning, that capture the poetry of the original, and that work for both reader and hearer when read aloud in modern English.

In the original Greek, the Epistles of Saint Paul often have exceptionally long sentences, where a single sentence can run for several verses, or even an entire reading. Again, these do not translate effectively word-for-word into a text that is easy to follow when read aloud in modern English. SSRA breaks these down into clauses and sentences which are easier to follow for reader and hearer alike, without loss of meaning or nuance.

The aim is to have Old Testament poetry, and New Testament Epistle readings, which are just as engaging as narratives: which draw the hearer in, and communicate the full meaning of each passage, in language which is clear, timeless, dignified, and even poetic.

More generally, in both Old and New Testament, repetition is sometimes added for clarity, or sometimes removed where it is unnecessary, distracting, or intrusive. Verses are occasionally rearranged within a reading; Saint Paul, in particular, often announces his conclusion first, and then sets out his argument, whereas it is more natural, to the modern western ear – and more memorable – to hear the conclusion at the end. Tongue-twisters, long lists, rhetorical questions, and archaic language are all avoided. Specifically, SSRA avoids the long-lost archaic use of the English word ‘hope’ as a translation of the Greek *elpis* or the Hebrew *tiqvah*, *miqveh* or *tocheleth*, all of which are better expressed as confident, joyful trust.

A distinctive feature of SSRA specifically for the sake of the hearer is its avoidance of potential distractions. There may be details in the original Greek or Hebrew which would not have been distractions at the time, but which would be distractions today. If they are present as part of a metaphor, it could be a legitimate translation of the metaphor to render the metaphor in an equivalent but less distracting form – so ‘not worthy to lace his sandals’ translates legitimately as ‘not worthy to be his servant’, and the jackals and ostriches of Isaiah 43.20 (Year B, Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time) become mere ‘wild animals’, lest they distract from the actual message, which is that God lavishes infinite grace upon us, despite all our failings and rebellion.

And a distinctive feature of SSRA specifically for the sake of the reader is its handling of challenging proper nouns. Zarephath is replaced by its modern name Sarepta. Zechariah is anglicised with a K to look more instantly readable as Zekariah. Ananias is more instantly readable as Anan-ias. Bethlehem is simply Bethlehem, with no mention of Ephratha. David visits Saul’s camp with his nephew, with no need to specify that the nephew is called Abishai. When Moses names a place Massah and Meribah, the point is that those words mean Quarrel and Testing, so in SSRA, Moses names the place ‘Quarrel’ and ‘Testing’. And the list of place names in the Pentecost reading from Acts chapter 2 is translated here as “Asia and Arabia, Egypt and North Africa, Judea, Turkey, Syria, Greece and the Balkans, Crete, and Rome.”

As already noted on page 7 – and it is the case with any modern translation – a preacher may wish to refer to a more literal study translation, or indeed the original Hebrew or Greek, when making a word-by-word or line-by-line analysis of the text, perhaps with phrases like “in the full text, it says”, or “in the RSV, it says”, or “in the original Greek, it says”.

Inclusive language

SSRA uses inclusive language in relation to gender, both for humankind in general, and for anonymous individuals, including anonymous characters in most parables. SSRA also avoids using gendered pronouns for God, Lord, the Holy Spirit, the eternal Christ, and the eternal Word. As part of the aim is a text that sounds timeless, modern alternative pronouns are not used; instead, sentences and paragraphs are constructed using ‘you’, or ‘I’, or ‘they’ (used as a plural), or avoiding pronouns altogether. The result is generally imperceptible, unless specifically pointed out. What is avoided is the negative effect of the default use of the male pronoun, which is alien to an increasingly large proportion of the population. Jesus, including the risen Jesus, takes he/him pronouns. The Father-Son metaphor within the Trinity is also retained; it carries centuries of inter-cultural meaning and rich nuance, and it is still the case that female or genderless alternatives (parent, mother, child, daughter) bring very different nuances; that conversation is left for the pulpit and the bible study, rather than the lectern.

Two specific gospel texts from Year A have been given special attention, because misogynistic nuances, not present in the original Greek, have become attached to their traditional English-language translations. These are Matthew 15.21-28 (Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time), and Matthew 25.1-13 (Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time / Third Sunday before Advent). In the latter, to prevent distraction, the gender of the lamp-bearers in the parable is not specified, but the translation deserves this footnote: that in the original Greek, the extra point is being made that women have independence and agency, just as much as men, in the question of working and preparing for the coming of the kingdom.

In common with many modern translations, SSRA seeks to avoid using language that has become tainted by association with antisemitism. Where practical, SSRA also attempts to reduce unnecessarily repetitive use of language that has been adopted by partisan actors in the twentieth and twenty-first century conflicts in the middle east, including in Israel-Palestine, using alternative language which is accurate, but avoids, where practical, terms that are in repeated daily use in current conflict news reporting, and have therefore for many acquired a largely different principle meaning. As always, with reference to all the above, a preacher may wish to refer to a more literal study translation, or indeed the original Hebrew or Greek, when making a word-by-word or line-by-line analysis of the text.