

Lost In Translation I

“If the King’s English was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.”
- Miriam “Ma” Ferguson

This delightful quote was attributed¹ to Ms. Ferguson during her campaign for the governorship of Texas (which she won!) in an attempt by her opponents to portray her as backward (she opposed bilingualism in Texas schools). The humor of this anecdote arises because most of us know that English was not the original language of the Bible.

The downside of our understanding is that we also tend to believe that the biblical texts have been conveyed accurately. This is almost always a safe assumption. Mistranslations, while more common than most realize, are almost always of little consequence. However, much of the Bible’s nuance, and therefore its deeper meanings, cannot be adequately expressed in English. The two languages (not to mention the cultures in which they arose) are vastly different. In this article we will examine one such example of lost nuance. So, put on your grammar hat and join me in a two-part exploration of Genesis 2:1-3.

In the first sentence of Genesis 2:1, the divine author writes,

Thus, were the creation of the heavens and the earth completed, including all their hosts.

In this verse, the Hebrew verb meaning “*completed*” occurs in a special form² that serves to intensify its meaning. What do I mean by intensify? Consider the verb “*broke*”. In English, we could intensify ‘*broke*’ by using ‘*smashed*’ or ‘*shattered*’. In other words, English requires different words to intensify meaning. Hebrew, however and unlike English, uses the same word but with a different spelling/pronunciation. For example, here is how ‘*broke*’ is intensified in Hebrew:

Normal	Intensified
/shavar/ (He broke)	/yeshaver/ (He smashed) ³

Now consider the English verb ‘*completed*’ (used in 2:1). There really is no other word that intensifies ‘*completed*’. Thus, when *yeshaver* is translated as ‘*completed*’, its nuance is lost in the translation. In Hebrew, the intensification would have been immediately and clearly understood. An example may help: here is a paraphrased translation of verse 2:1 that more accurately represents what the ancient Hebrews would have understood.

“Let there be no doubt that at the end of the sixth day, the creation of the heavens and the earth and all their parts were (and are) fully and finally complete.”

¹ Falsely as it happens.

² Called the *Pual* stem.

³ What Moses did to the stone tablets.

The author is going out of his way to convey to the audience the finality of God's creative work..

Now, go and study