GETTING THE RIGHT MEANING

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Category: English Bibles

I've long been a fan ofÂ the Net Bible, not least because it includes an extensive set of excellent translators' notes. Michael Burer is assistant director of the Net Bible project and he has just blogged about a new note which was added to Joshua 8:18.

> *I just put the finishing touches on a new note for Joshua 8:18 in the NET Bible because of the input of some faithful readers. They had noticed that our translation of this verse differed from many other translations, and they wondered why. Our current text in the first edition reads as follows:*
>
> > The LORD told Joshua, "Hold out toward Ai the curved sword in your hand, for I am handing the city over to you." So Joshua held out toward Ai the curved sword in his hand.
>
> *The major point of difference revolves around the word we translated "curved sword." Most other translations have "spear" (like NKJV) or "javelin" (like NIV, ESV and NASB). Clearly these are two different weapons, so which is correct?*

He goes on to show how studies of the Dead Sea scrolls have demonstrated that the word *kidon* which has traditionally been translated as spear is much more likely to be curved in the manner of a modern-day scimitar. A note has been added to the text of the Net Bible to explain this for curious readers.

There is no way in which I am qualified to judge on this choice of translation, though someone like John Hobbins of Ancient Hebrew Poetry may have something interesting to add. What interests me mostly here is the issue of translation principles, which Dr Burer sums up nicely in three points:

> 1. *Just because something has always been translated a certain way does not mean that it is correct.*
> 2. *We should always value the light ancient documents shed on our understanding of the Scriptures, even for an issue as mundane as the meaning of a single, obscure word.*
> 3. *We should always use the most up to date, accurate tools available. (In this instance, HALOT has the more accurate information as opposed to the other well-known Hebrew lexicon BDB.)*

I would just add a little additional comment; those who argue that the King James Version is the only legitimate translation of the Scriptures in English are cutting themselves off from the best understanding of the Bible. As our understanding of the manuscripts and Biblical languages grows, we will continually be able to fine tune our translations in a way that improves our understanding. It is true that no major doctrine of the faith is challenged by knowing that Joshua was holding a

scimitar rather than a spear, but it does help to place him in his historical and geographical context. (To my mind, Joshua immediately becomes more *foreign* when pictured with a curved sword rather than a javelin).

I am the last one to say that we need to keep on churning out English translations to meet every niche in the market, but on the other hand it is true that continued scholarship does allow us to produce better translations as time goes on.

HT to Andy Cheung for the original link.