

# Translating the Bible for Children: The Importance of the Target Audience and the Role of the Translator in Making Meaning.

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## **Abstract**

Translated into some eight-hundred languages, the Holy Bible is one of the most translated pieces of writing in the history of human written language. Within this broad scope of translation, there are not only target audiences of varying languages and cultures, but also of ages and levels of linguistic comprehension. Translations for children present an extra challenge because they provide a complicated task of the translator to produce a text that, above all, cannot be misunderstood. By examining the translator prefaces, accompanying illustrations, and selected verses from two English children's Bibles, the role of the translator in ensuring the comprehensibility of the text is split into examples of foreignizing and domesticating translation methods. However, regardless of translation methods, both translator prefaces include a statement revoking responsibility for errors in translation which complicates the role of the translator as the one responsible for comprehension. Looking at the preface justifications in conjunction with the language of the texts themselves and theory from Bible scholar Nida, fostering understanding on the part of the target audience is ultimately revealed to be the responsibility of the translator, though acknowledgement of the child audience in the translator-text-audience interaction is also vital.

**Keywords:** Target Audience, Foreignization, Domestication, Bible Translation, Translating for Children

Translated into some eight-hundred languages and representing around eighty percent of the world's population, the Holy Bible is one of the most translated pieces of writing in the history of human written language (Nida 1). Within this broad scope of translation are not only target audiences of varying languages and cultures, but also of ages and levels of linguistic comprehension. Of the many versions of the Holy Bible translated into English, both the *New International Version (NIV)* and the *New Century Version (NCV)* exist as contemporary, modern English translations, and have editions aimed at children as the target audience (*NIV*<sub>v</sub>, *NCV*<sub>x-xi</sub>). Modern Bible translations tend to follow the model outlined by Nida in the shift from the older focus of translating “the form of the message” and reproducing stylistic specialties, to focusing on “the response of the receptor to the translated message”; thus, emphasizing a reader-focused approach (1). The goal of Bible translation has shifted from that of a more literal translation to one that is freer and emphasizes comprehension in reception over adhering to stylistic qualities of the source material. Furthermore, versions of the Holy Bible often contain prefaces that include statements from the translating team or publisher identifying the process of constructing the text. This is the case with both versions for children of the *NIV* and *NCV* of the Holy Bible, as their prefaces provide extensive insight into their translation processes and their respective version's focus on comprehension and acknowledgement of their target audience. Through conducting a comparative study of the prefaces of the *New International Version* and *New Century Version* of the Holy Bible aimed at children, as well as sample passages from the text charged with authenticating the message of, and building faith in Jesus (Deere 103-4), the two translations reveal themselves to have contrasting expectations of their target audience. Ultimately, child target audiences require domesticating translations for maximum comprehension which further proves that making meaning of the word of God is the translator's responsibility. However, I will argue that although the translator's role is integral, the only way domestication is truly successful in this context is through a collaborative effort between the translator and child target audience.

In order to situate translations for children as inherently different from those targeted towards adults, the definition of “children” must first be established.

Unfortunately, as Ritta Oittinen addresses in *Translating for Children*, “there is little consensus on the definition of childhood, child, or children’s literature,” therefore, she resigns to “define” them implicitly, according to whatever publishers, authors, or translators *think* of as children (Oittinen 4). Her “definition” refers to books read by children which often include illustrations, which describes the two texts under scrutiny within this paper, and thus places them in the category of children’s literature (4). Oittinen also speaks to the role of the translator in conjunction with children and authority, claiming, “as adult parents, authors, illustrators, translators, as adult politicians and decision-makers, we are the authorities over children” (52). Her statement implicates the translator as having power over children, and this hierarchy establishes the influence that decisions made by the translator have over a child target audience in their communication of information through text and illustration.

To better understand the role of the translator in Bible translations, the translation goals, motivations, and target audience within the texts must first be acknowledged. The *New International Version*, published in 2003 by Zonderkids – a division of Zondervan publishing – is presented as “The Backpack Bible”, and the preface claims that this version was translated by the Committee of Bible Translations as a “completely new translation of the Holy Bible made by over a hundred scholars working directly from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts”, which lends to its authenticity (*NIV* v). This edition notes that participating translators came from many denominations, listing thirteen different examples to exemplify the efforts to safeguard this translation from sectarian bias (v). The Committee’s attempt to emphasize the collaborative efforts and extensive research into the source texts of various languages suggests increased accuracy in the translation itself. The Committee states their goals for this translation are to create “an accurate translation and one that would have clarity and literal quality and so provide suitable for public and private reading, teaching, preaching, memorizing and liturgical use” (v); goals that speak to a universal understanding of the translation rather than a targeted one. Thus, it is interesting that no direct mention of comprehensibility for children is among these goals, as this particular version is geared towards that specific audience.

By contrast, the *New Century Version* states clearly in the preface that this version is the *International Children's Bible*, and therefore the translation goals, motivations, and target audience that are clearly outlined in the preface of the text also address this fact. The *NCV* states plainly that this version of the Bible is not a storybook or paraphrased Bible but instead “a translation of God’s Word from the original Hebrew and Greek languages” that is prepared “specifically for children” (*NCV* ix). The *NCV* specifically addresses the target audience where the *NIV* was vague in its universal applicability. The *NCV* also outlines their two goals in providing a trustworthy and clear translation, stating that their focus is in producing a translation that is “faithful to manuscripts in the original languages” and that the language is “simple enough for children to read and understand for themselves” (ix). The preface outlines that they achieve the goal of faithfulness in a similar way to the *NIV*, by employing a team from the World Bible Translation Center as well as twenty-one additional, highly qualified and experienced Bible scholars and translators which, as with the *NIV*, lends itself to the idea is that this translation has a high degree of accuracy (ix). Further, in adjusting the language used in translation to remain understandable to a child audience, the preface stresses that they maintained a clear translation based on language simplicity through vocabulary guidelines and that sentences were kept short and uncomplicated for increased comprehension (ix.). The *NCV* Bible thus highlights its main aim of remaining clear to child readers very clearly in the preface, which is later effectively reflected in their translation of the text itself.

Looking comparatively at the two translations in terms of visual presentation aids in illuminating each texts’ acknowledgement of their child audience. As the target audience is not specifically mentioned in the *NIV* prologue to be children, it raises questions about the validity of calling this translation a ‘children’s Bible’ solely in terms of written content. Visual and interactive elements of the text, however, heavily support the idea of the text as one geared at young readers. The *NIV* contains twelve full colour and visually stimulating pages of illustrations linking verses of the text to elements of children’s lives such as school, shopping, or friends in a biblically didactic manner (*NIV*). As it is referred to as the “Backpack Bible”, illustrations of backpacks and their contents are prevalent, and these images of school books and toys inside the backpacks suggests a strong link

between the text and an audience of backpack-wearing age – which in this case is children:

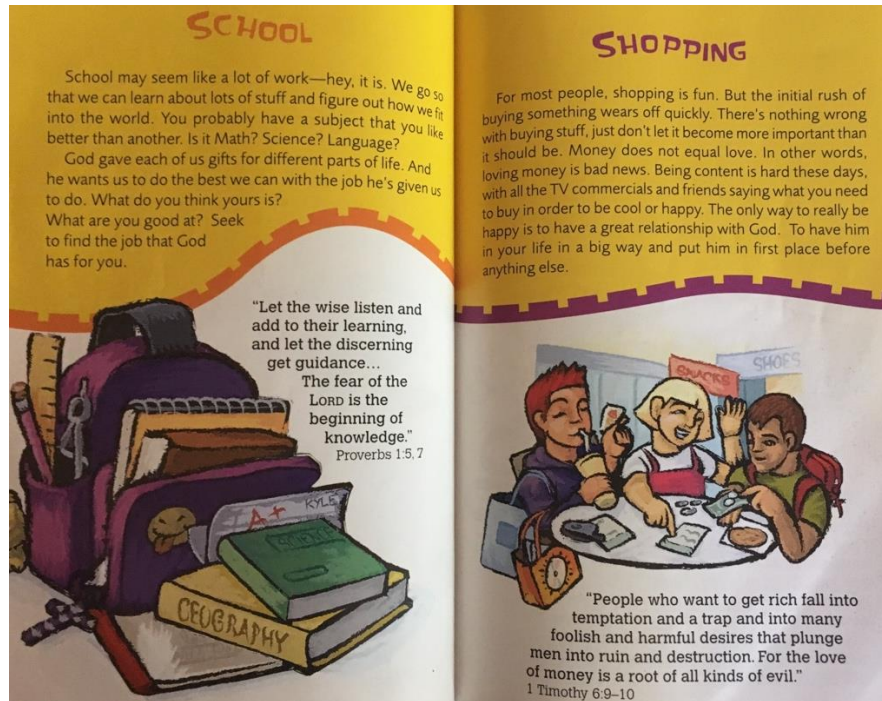


Fig. 1 Sample of illustrated pages in the *NIV* Backpack Bible.

Figure 1 illustrates the integration of youth and events that children partake in into the Bible as a means of appealing to child audiences. Verses are shown in conjunction with real life experiences to demonstrate how a child could incorporate God's teachings into their everyday life. However, despite the *NIV*'s attempts to appeal visually to child audiences, these illustrations become less significant if the text itself is not amended for understanding by a younger audience.

While the *NIV* reflected its target audience in colourful illustrations and relatable and interactive pages, the *NCV* children's Bible utilizes these elements within the publication to complement their efforts in aiming their translation at child readers. The *NCV* children's Bible employs detailed illustrations in the table of contents and throughout the text and addresses these additions in the preface as study aids to "help children visualize the great scenes of God's Word" (*NCV* x):

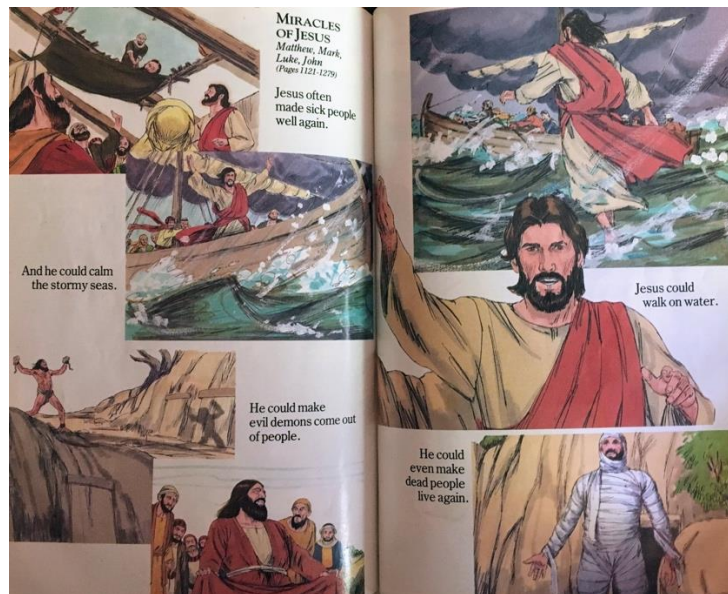


Fig. 2 Illustrated examples of miracles performed by Jesus in the *NCV Children's Bible*.

Appearing in a comic format, important moments in the text – such as the miracles of Jesus as showcased by figure 2 – are depicted through images to allow for a visual understanding of the highlighted moment. Where the *NIV's* illustrations function to bring the word of God into the context of a child's life, the *NCV* works to present stories from the Bible more accessibly so that the child reader can understand the meaning behind the text with greater ease. Schleiermacher in his text “On the Different Methods of Translating”, addresses this relationship between the source material and the target audience as methods of domesticating and foreignizing a text in translation. His theory is that there are two paths that can be taken by the translator – or in this case illustrator – to either leave the reader in peace as much as possible and move the writer towards him (domestication), or leave the writer in peace and move the reader towards him (foreignization) (Schleiermacher 49). It appears that in terms of the content of the illustrations, the *NIV* favours domesticating and the *NCV* a more foreignizing approach; therefore, the question remains whether or not the language of the texts themselves perpetuate or contradict the respective approaches of their illustrations. And further, which of these approaches holds more value in translating the Bible:

the accuracy of the adaptation of the source material or the emphasis on clarity and comprehension in gearing translation towards the target audience?

The variation between the two texts in terms of language geared towards the target audience reveals that the translation approaches taken with the illustrations juxtapose those of the actual language of the text. Looking specifically at passages from the New Testament that perform the function of inspiring belief, the language utilized by each respective translation lends itself to different levels of comprehension by a child audience. This analysis will focus on three miracles performed by Jesus that are present in both translations: a miracle demonstrating power over nature, a healing miracle, and a miracle of raising the dead as a way to determine the degree to which the translator is responsible as a maker of meaning. Below is a table with linguistic comparison for the first miracle in which Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding feat in Cana in John 2:1-11:

<i>New International Version (NIV)</i> MORE COMPLEX LANGUAGE:	<i>New Century Version (NCV)</i> SIMPLIFIED LANGUAGE:
“brim” “draw” “banquet”	“top” “take” “feast”
“this, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him”	“so, in Cana of Galilee, Jesus did his first miracle. There he showed his glory and his followers believed in him”

In both translations, Jesus says to the servants to “fill the jars with water” however the *NIV* specifies the jars be filled to the “brim” and to “draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet” whereas the *NCV* requires the jars be filled to the “top” and to “take some out and give it to the master of the feast” (*NIV* and *NCV*, John 2.7-8). These passages contain three pairs of synonymous words of contrasting degrees of complexity with the *NIV*’s use of “brim”, the verb to “draw”, and the setting as a “banquet” requiring a more learned target audience than would be necessary to understand the meanings behind “top”, the verb to “take”, and the setting as a “feast”. This requirement reigns true in the summative concluding verse of the story where the *NIV* translation reads, “this, the first of his

miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him” (*NIV*, John 2.11). By contrast, the *NCV* translation aimed at a child target audience translated this concluding statement as “so, in Cana of Galilee, Jesus did his first miracle. There he showed his glory and his followers believed in him” (*NCV*, John 2.11). Again, simpler language and shorter sentences were utilized by the translators of the *NCV* as a means of domesticating the text for greater accessibility. Bearing in mind, the intent of this analysis is not to prescribe a certain level of intelligence on children as a collective readership in assuming their ignorance to the meaning of the language used by the *NIV*. However, the *NCV* translator’s use of simplified language points to their application of domestication in their textual translation.

Advocating for the domestication approach, the preferences of Bible scholar Eugene Nida are adopted by the *NCV* Bible in their translation for children more so than by the *NIV*’s translation. Nida theorizes in his preface to *The Theory and Practice of Translation* that “translating is essentially a process of communication and this means that a translator must go beyond the lexical structures to consider the manner in which an intended audience is likely to understand a text, because so much depends on the underlying presuppositions of the respective source and target culture” (Nida vii). In the case where the intended audience is children, the simplification of language is not only important from a lexical understanding perspective, but also in terms of translating more archaic and biblical language into understandable terms without losing the meaning. With this quote, however, the notion that the translator bears full responsibility for meaning begins to fall apart. As Nida suggests, the translator has the responsibility to consider how an intended audience could understand a text, however, it is impossible for them to have knowledge of everything that is encompassed in “underlying presuppositions”, thereby implicating the necessity of the input of the target audience in understanding the translation.

The *NCV*’s alteration of language to fit their target audience is again seen in the second type of miracle performed by Jesus – that of healing – where what is at stake in misunderstanding the language is revealed. This miracle is from the book of Matthew 9:27-34, and is titled “Jesus Heals the Blind and Mute” and “Jesus Heals More People” by the *NIV* and *NCV* respectively (*NIV* and *NCV*, Matthew



9.27). The omission of “blind” and “mute” by the *NCV* removes the potential for misunderstanding should a child reader be unaware of the meaning behind these afflictions. Their inclusion of the word “more” in reference to the amount of people that are being healed by Jesus works to function as a way to foster faith because of its suggestion that he has healed other people previously and still continues to do so. The story itself is didactic in that the blind and mute people are healed by their own faith in Jesus, however, the language used by the two translations of this didactic moment varies greatly.

<i>New International Version (NIV)</i> REQUIRING CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING:	<i>New Century Version (NCV)</i> REMOVES THE POTENTIAL FOR MISUNDERSTANDING:
“then he touched their eyes and said, ‘according to your faith will it be done to you’; and their sight was restored”	“then Jesus touched their eyes and said, ‘you believe that I can make you see again. So this will happen.’ Then the men were able to see”

Both translations begin with Jesus questioning the blind men if they believe that he can heal them (*NIV* and *NCV*, Matthew 9.28). The *NIV* translation reads “then he touched their eyes and said, ‘according to your faith will it be done to you’; and their sight was restored”, in which the act of healing – represented as “it” – is not defined within the sentence itself and thus requires the reader to utilize contextual clues to interpret the action being performed (*NIV*, Matthew 9.29-30). The *NCV* removes the potential for confusion in their translation, “then Jesus touched their eyes and said, ‘you believe that I can make you see again. So this will happen.’ Then the men were able to see” (*NCV*, Matthew 9.29-30). The *NCV*’s translation ensures comprehension on a basic linguistic level through the use of short, succinct sentences as well as clearly articulating Jesus’s task in healing the men so that they can “see again” (Matthew 9. 30). The emphasis of “faith in Jesus” in this miracle works to justify the importance of translating to cater to the understanding of the child target audience because it highlights what is potentially compromised by misunderstanding: a child’s belief in the power of Jesus. The translator then, as someone with authority over children as an

audience as acknowledged by Oittinen, must assume the responsibility to translate in order to foster the building of faith.

Nida elaborates on the notion that the translator is accountable for comprehension on the part of the child audience in his outline of expressions to avoid when translating domestically. Nida's test of comprehensibility in his text *The Theory and Practice of Translation* which addresses the elimination of two different types of expressions in order to increase understanding: "(1) those which are likely to be misunderstood and (2) those so difficult and 'heavy' (whether in vocabulary or grammar) as to discourage the reader from attempting to comprehend the content of the message" (Nida 2). Nida makes clear that comprehensibility is key to translating the Bible, but also that it is imperative to avoid situations in which choices made in translation could lead to a misunderstanding of meaning. The preface of the *NCV* states of a recent survey that their translation, "the *International Children's Bible* was clearly the easiest version for children to comprehend on a literal level" due to the care taken to avoid potential misunderstandings" (*NCV* ix). These efforts made by the *NCV* comply with Nida's guidelines on increasing comprehensibility. While I agree that the potential for misunderstanding should be avoided, translating a text so that every child regardless of upbringing, culture, and experiences has complete understanding is impossible. Instead, the translator has the responsibility to cater to the target audience to the best of their ability, while the reader must take responsibility in acknowledging the factors behind their own interpretations of the translated text.

By juxtaposing Nida's theory regarding domestication of the Bible in translation as seen in the *NCV* translation against the *NIV* translation, which is less accommodating to the target audience, the two translations represent opposite ends of the spectrum of the role of the translator in terms of foreignizing and domesticating. The final miracle – importantly distinguished from Jesus's final miracle chronologically in the New Testament – is that of the miracle of Jesus raising the dead, which serves as another example of domestication by the *NCV*. The *NIV* titles this story as "Jesus Raises a Widow's Son", requiring the audience to understand the concept and implications of being a "widow" as well as understanding that "raises" implies more than to elevate, but has connotations

implicating life and death (*NIV*, Luke 7.11). In mediating between the source text and the translation, the *NCV* translation's title for Luke 7:11, "Jesus Brings a Man Back to Life", clearly outlines the premise of the story without compromising on the understanding of the target audience (*NCV*, Luke 7.11). Already, the story is more accessible to a child reader in the *NCV* translation than that of the *NIV*. This final miracle points to the success of domestication in the textual examples produced by the *NCV* in catering the text to the child target audience.

This greater accessibility to the text is extended into the language of the story of the *NCV* translation of Jesus's miracle of raising the dead. The premise of the story is that Jesus travels to a town called Nain with a large crowd of followers and as he approaches the gates to the city, a funeral procession for a young man is seen exiting the gate. His conversation with the grieving mother goes as follows:

<i>New International Version (NIV)</i> ILLOCUTIONARY LANGUAGE:	<i>New Century Version (NCV)</i> STRAIGHTFORWARD LANGUAGE:
"when the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, 'don't cry'" and proceeded to touch the coffin and said, "young man, I say to you, get up!"	"when the Lord saw her, he felt very sorry for her. Jesus said to her, 'don't cry'" and upon touching the coffin exclaimed, "young man, I tell you, get up!"

The *NIV* translation assumes that the child reader is familiar with idioms and the meaning behind the concept of having a heart "go out to" someone. The *NCV* simplifies this expression in their translation, choosing to articulate Jesus's feelings in a more lexically comprehensible way for a child audience. Not only is the language used from a more basic lexicon, but by splitting the sentence containing Jesus's feelings and his address to the mother into two, the *NCV* translation makes the individual elements of the sentences more comprehensible as they are smaller pieces of information to process. The *NCV* also makes Jesus's speech to the resurrected man more straightforward using the words "I tell you" as a command to rise from the dead, rather than a commentary of what was articulated in that moment with "I say to you". Overall, a persistent theme throughout the

translations of *NCV* verses is that the use of less complicated language and lexicon allows the miracles performed by Jesus to be presented uncontestedly in terms of meaning, which allows for the purpose of these stories – that is, to strengthen the belief in the powers that Jesus possesses – to feature more prominently in the stories themselves. In all three textual examples, the translator, whether taking a foreignizing or domesticating approach, assumes responsibility to translate the text so as to present the idea that the child reader should place their faith in Jesus. Structuring the text so as to foster faith on the part of the child audience remains mainly the responsibility of the translator, even though knowledge of possible underlying presuppositions on the part of the child audience cannot be the responsibility of the translator alone.

The responsibility to make the translation understandable to the intended audience is embraced by the *NCV* Bible translation, and is reflected in their utilization of clear and concise language. This ultimately highlights the role of the translator as an intermediary force between the source text and the target audience, which is reflected in Lefevere’s chapter entitled “Translating Literature”. He articulates that, “translators should remember that their first task is to make the original accessible to the audience for whom they are translating, to mediate between their audience and their text” (Lefevere 19). Lefevere introduces the concept of the translator as a mediator, which functions to give the text and the reader more active roles in the translation transaction. The translator is still responsible for translating so as to prevent misunderstanding, but the child target audience must also acknowledge their own biases and experiences that hinder their understanding.

This conclusion that domesticating Bible translations for children is ideal for fostering understanding, and that in order for domestication to truly be possible, the translator and child audience must share the responsibility over translation is acceptable until we consider the paradoxical excuse statements within the translator prefaces of the Bible translations. Despite all efforts put forth towards a most faithful and accurate translation by both parties, both prefaces conclude with a justification that works to complicate their roles as narrators and remove responsibility for making meaning of the text:

<i>New International Version (NIV)</i>	<i>New Century Version (NCV)</i>
<p>Like all translations of the Bible, made as they are by imperfect man, this one undoubtedly falls short of its goals.</p> <p>Yet we are grateful to God for the extent to which he has enabled us to realize these goals and for the strength he has given us and our colleagues to complete our task (<i>NIV</i> vii).</p>	<p>“we acknowledge the infallibility of God’s Word and our own human frailty. We pray that God has worked through us as his vessels so that his precious children might learn his truth for themselves and that it might richly grow in their lives” (<i>NCV</i> x).</p>

These statements concluding their translation prefaces complicate any failures within the translations as it transfers responsibility away from the translators and onto the inherent fault within man. By lessening the status of men against God in this passage, the translators of the *NIV* cede responsibility for imperfections as God has the ultimate control over “the extent to which he has enabled us to realize these goals... and complete our task” (*NIV* vii). In the same way, by acknowledging “human frailty”, the translators of the *NCV* recognize an inherent fault within man in their ability to translate. Although it is important to acknowledge limitations as a translator whether they be your own or due to outside circumstances, these statements aid in removing responsibility from the translators themselves. The role of the translator as a mediator between the source text and the target audience is interrupted by the presence of God, and thus the responsibility of the translator to make choices in translation that promote a certain meaning to be understood by the target audience is deflected away from the translator themselves. These statements of ‘excuse’ remove the potential for contest and place blame of potential misunderstanding on the collective, rather than the individual translators which complicates their roles as makers of meaning.

Even though I argue that the child audience must actively acknowledge their own role in translations of the content of the Bible, these excusatory statements make a paradox out of the role of the translator. The translators of these two versions of the Bible have a responsibility to create a clear translation – as they have stated in their respective prefaces – so as to increase the comprehension of a child audience; however, at the same time, they conclude their prefaces with

disclaimers that remove their responsibility over the text. As God himself cannot create, nor revise translations, it stands to reason that the translator cannot disappear from their translation of the Bible, nor sever their relationship with the child audience. Instead, translators need to embrace their authoritative role in relation to children and domesticate the text to the best of their ability so as to not complicate the child's understanding of the message of the Bible. Likewise, child audiences need to be informed that translators cannot translate to cater to every individual's level of understanding, and that understanding the meaning of the text must be considered a collaborative endeavour. In the context of the *NIV* and *NCV* translations of the Bible, although the *NCV*'s domesticating approach works to demonstrate this role of the translator better than that of the *NIV* textually, visual elements of the text are also vital to the marketability of the text to children and function within the discussion of comprehensibility. Ultimately, translations of the Bible exist in English in many forms, dependent on everything from sects of belief to age and comprehension levels of the reader. These translations aimed at children have varying degrees of accessibility which ultimately affects the fundamental understanding of the faith. As the perpetuators of the Word of God, Bible translators have a responsibility to convey the meaning of the text with as much accuracy as possible, and therefore it is better to domesticate the text and cater to the target audience than remain lexically true to the source text and foster the potential for confusion.

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