

Guilt Without Grace: The Translation of Hamartia as Tsumi and the Literary Imagination of Sin in Meiji and Modern Japan

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Abstract

This study examines how the 1880 Meiji New Testament translated the Greek terms *hamartia* (sin) and *charis* (grace) within the scope of the four Gospels and the book of Romans. Using corpus analysis and Voyant Tools, it compares the distribution of the Japanese term *tsumi* (sin) with the renderings used for *charis*. The analysis finds that *tsumi* was applied consistently to *hamartia* and extended to Greek terms associated with judgment, condemnation, legal charge, and trespass. By contrast, *charis* appears through four unstable renderings: *onchō*, *on*, *megumi*, and *aiseraretari*. The result was an asymmetrical moral vocabulary in which guilt and divine judgment acquired a stable, legally weighted expression while grace remained fragmented and socially inflected. The paper situates this pattern within descriptive translation studies and theories of translation ideology, arguing that the translation's institutional norms shaped Japanese literary language beyond the biblical text. It then traces the literary implications of this asymmetry in Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku* (1948), where the protagonist cannot identify an antonym for crime. The study concludes that the Meiji translation did not merely transfer theological terms; it helped structure a modern Japanese moral imagination in which guilt was more lexically available than redemption.

Keywords: Meiji Bible translation, hamartia, charis, Japanese literary language, corpus analysis

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Introduction

The completion of the Meiji Bible translation in the late nineteenth century was not merely a linguistic achievement but a structuring act, one whose consequences exceeded its agents' intentions and whose effects on Japanese moral imagination have not been fully reckoned with (Sheehan, 2005; Venuti, 1995, pp. 1–2). As Japan opened to Western influence during the Meiji period, Protestant missionaries faced a fundamental challenge: how to render the theological vocabulary of Greek and Hebrew scripture into a language whose existing moral and religious lexicon carried entirely different weights (Cohen, 2013, p. 3). The choices they made, under pressure from institutional mandates, competing translation philosophies, and the urgent pragmatics of evangelism (Cary, 1909, pp. 112–115; Hepburn, 1883, pp. 411–413), encoded a particular moral theology into modern Japanese literary language at the precise moment that language was being standardized (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57; Twine, 1991, p. 34).

Central to Protestant Christianity is the concept of sin, *hamartia* in Greek, a term whose semantic range in the New Testament encompasses moral failure, legal transgression, and ontological estrangement from God (Bauer et al., 2000, pp.49–50). In translating the Bible into Japanese, the Meiji committee chose 罪 (*tsumi*) as its primary rendering, a word that already carried legal, ritual, and punitive connotations in Japanese religious and civic life, shaped by Shinto notions of ritual pollution and Buddhist concepts of karmic demerit (Arichea, 1978, p. 201; Tomasi, 2021, p. 114). This study argues that this choice, while lexically defensible, produced a structurally consequential misalignment: by overextending 罪 across a range of Greek terms well beyond *hamartia* itself, and by failing to establish a comparably stable rendering for the corresponding vocabulary of grace (*charis*), the Meiji translators encoded into modern Japanese literary language a moral framework weighted toward divine judgment and largely silent on redemption. The literary consequences of that asymmetry, this paper contends, are legible as late as Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku* (1948).

Table 1

Frequency Comparison Across Greek, Japanese, and English

Gospel	Greek term	#	Japanese term (expected)	#	English term (expected)	#
Matthew	ἁμαρτία (<i>hamartia</i>) and conjugations	13	罪	25	sin/sins	14
Mark	ἁμαρτία (<i>hamartia</i>) and conjugations	9	罪	13	sin/sins	14
Luke	ἁμαρτία (<i>hamartia</i>) and conjugations	11	罪	25	sin/sins	31
John	ἁμαρτία (<i>hamartia</i>) and conjugations	17	罪	29	sin/sins	22

This paper pursues that argument through two parallel lines of corpus analysis. The first examines the consistency and overextension of 罪 (*tsumi*) across the four Gospels of the 1880 Meiji New Testament, using Voyant Tools to map the full range of Greek terms rendered as *tsumi*, including terms for judgment (*krisis*), condemnation (*katakrino*), and legal charge (*aitia*), that fall outside *hamartia*'s semantic field. The second examines the parallel treatment of *charis* (grace) across the same corpus, tracing the instability of its Japanese rendering across four distinct terms, 恩寵 (*onchō*), 恩 (*on*), 恵 (*megumi*), and 愛せられたり (*aiseraretari*), none of which achieved the doctrinal stability that 罪 acquired. Situating these findings within Toury's descriptive translation studies and Venuti's concept of ideological invisibility (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57; Venuti, 1995, pp. 1–2), the paper argues that the asymmetry between a stable, overextended sin vocabulary and a fragmented, underweighted grace vocabulary was not a failure of equivalence but an institutional act, one whose consequences shaped the moral imagination of Japanese literary culture for generations (Williams, 2003, pp. 309–312).

Table 2*Grace Asymmetry, Charis Renderings in the Meiji New Testament*

Greek	Verse	KJV rendering	Meiji rendering	Japanese term	Register
χάρις	John 1:14	grace	恩寵	onchō	Hierarchical divine favor
χάρις	John 1:17	grace	恩寵	onchō	Hierarchical divine favor
χάρις	Romans 5:20	grace	恩	on	Social obligation/debt
χάρις	Romans 6:14	grace	恩	on	Social obligation/debt
χάρις	Luke 1:30	favour	恵	megumi	Domestic blessing
χάρις	Luke 2:52	favour	愛せられたり	aisera retari	Affective, no grace term
χάρις	Ephesians 2:8	grace	恩	on	Social obligation/debt

Literature Review

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 initiated a period of rapid modernization and openness to Western influence, including the return of Christian missionaries—primarily in the form of Protestant aligned groups—who had been banned from Japan since the seventeenth century. Central to their evangelistic project was the translation of the Christian scriptures into Japanese, a task that involved not merely linguistic conversion but the negotiation of vast cultural and theological distance between Protestant Christianity and Japan's existing religious systems of Shinto and Buddhism (Cohen, 2013, pp. 3–4).

The most influential figure in this translation effort was Dr. James Curtis Hepburn (1815–1911), missionary, linguist, and principal architect of the translation committee's guiding philosophy. Hepburn advocated for an *ad litteram* approach, a commitment to staying as close as possible to the original Greek and Hebrew texts on the grounds that theological accuracy demanded it. At the 1883 General Conference of Protestant Missionaries in Osaka, he argued explicitly that the Bible, as the word of God, required translations that preserved its original meaning, particularly for foundational theological terms (Hepburn, 1883, pp. 411–413). His critique of Chinese Protestant translations centered on precisely this point: that departures from the literal source text had introduced dangerous theological distortions, particularly around terms for God and Spirit (Hepburn, 1883, p. 420).

Yet Hepburn's *ad litteram* principle contained an unresolvable tension. The Japanese term chosen for hamartia, 罪 (*tsumi*), was not a neutral vessel waiting to be filled with Protestant meaning. In Shinto ritual, *tsumi* denoted pollution and transgression requiring purification (*harae*) rather than confession or moral reckoning (Arichea, 1978, p. 201). In Buddhist usage, the compound 罪業 (*zaigō*) carried connotations of inherited karmic demerit, collective and accumulated rather than individually confessed. In classical Chinese and Edo-period legal discourse, 罪 functioned primarily as a term for crime and its corresponding punishment (Tomasi, 2021, pp. 114–115). None of these prior registers constructed the interiority, the individual conscience standing before a judging God, that Protestant sin theology required. Hepburn's literal fidelity to the Greek source could not prevent the Japanese target from bringing its own history to the word the translation committee chose.

Methodology

This study employs corpus analysis of the four Gospels of the 1880 Meiji New Testament (*Shinyaku Seisho*, 1880), Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, using Voyant Tools (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2016) to map the translation of two parallel theological lexemes: hamartia (sin) and

charis (grace). This digitally assisted approach follows the broader integration of digital humanities methods into biblical studies, where computational tools can make textual patterns and relationships visible across corpora (Clivaz & Allen, 2019). The Greek base text is the Textus Receptus (*Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*, 1550), which archival evidence confirms was among the reference texts used by the translation committee (Meiji Gakuin University Library Digital Archives, n.d.). The King James Version (*The Holy Bible: Authorized Version*, 1811) serves as the English comparator, not as a source text but as a benchmark for the doctrinal register the translators were working within, given its well-documented tendency toward legal and judgmental framing of Protestant theological concepts (Tomasi, 2012, p. 133).

The analysis proceeds in two stages. The first traces the rendering of hamartia and its conjugates across all four Gospels, identifying instances where 罪 (tsumi) is used to translate Greek terms outside hamartia's semantic field, including terms for judgment (krisis), condemnation (katakrino), legal charge (aitia), and trespass (*paraptōma*). This overextension, following Toury's concept of translation norms, reveals the degree to which 罪 became a normalized container for an entire punitive semantic field rather than a precise equivalent for sin as such (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57). The second stage applies the same method to charis across the same corpus, examining the consistency, or lack thereof, of its Japanese rendering. Where the tsumi analysis reveals normalization and overextension, the charis analysis reveals fragmentation: four distinct Japanese terms deployed across the same theological concept, none achieving the doctrinal stability that 罪 acquired. The asymmetry between these two findings constitutes the paper's central empirical claim. A secondary finding concerns the gendered distribution of the tsumi/akugyō distinction in Luke, which will be addressed in the next section (Garcés, 2014, p. 115).

Table 3
Gendered Distribution, Hamartōlos Renderings in Luke

Verse	Greek	KJV rendering	Meiji rendering	Subject
Luke 7:37	ἁματωλός	sinner	悪行 (akugyō)	Woman who anoints Jesus
Luke 7:39	ἁματωλός	sinner	悪行 (akugyō)	Same woman, Pharisee's description
Luke 5:8	ἁματωλός	sinner	罪人 (zainin)	Peter (male)
Luke 15:1	ἁματωλοί	sinner	罪ある者	Tax collectors (male)
Luke 18:13	ἁματωλός	sinner	罪人 (zainin)	Tax collector (male)
Luke 19:7	ἁματωλός	sinner	罪ある人	Zacchaeus (male)

Results

The corpus analysis of the four Gospels reveals a consistent and consequential pattern: 罪 (tsumi) functions in the Meiji New Testament not as a precise equivalent for hamartia but as a normalized container for an entire punitive semantic field (Shinyaku Seisho, 1880). In Matthew, hamartia appears thirteen times and is rendered as 罪 in every instance, a consistency that superficially confirms Hepburn's ad litteram principle. Yet 罪 appears twenty-five times in Matthew, absorbing Greek terms whose semantic range extends well beyond sin: *paraptōma* (trespasses), *opheiletais* (debts), *krinete* (judge), *krimati* (judgment), *katedikasate* (condemn), *anaitioi* (guiltless), and *aitian* (charge). What presents itself as literal translation is in practice what Toury would identify as the operation of a translation norm: 罪 has become the target-language solution for an entire field of legal and moral transgression, not a careful rendering of one specific Greek concept (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57).

The same overextension appears in Mark, where 罪 absorbs not only hamartia but *krima* (condemnation) and *katakrithēsetai* (condemned), producing the compound 罪せらるる in contexts where the Greek speaks of legal judgment rather than sin. In John, where hamartia appears seventeen times, the pattern holds with one significant exception: John 8:34, where *hamartian* (sinful) is rendered not as 罪 but as 悪 (aku, evil), “those who do evil are slaves to evil” (悪を行ふ者は悪の奴隷なり). This departure from tsumi in a passage that is theologically central to the Protestant doctrine of sin's enslaving power is precisely the kind of inconsistency Hepburn's ad litteram principle was meant to prevent (Hepburn, 1883, p. 420). That it occurs here suggests the limits of any translation philosophy when the target language's semantic history exerts its own pressure.

Luke introduces the section's most significant secondary finding. In Luke 7:37 and 7:39, where the Greek *hamartōlos* (sinner) refers to the woman who anoints Jesus's feet, the Meiji translation substitutes 悪行 (akugyō, evil deeds) for 罪 (tsumi). The identical Greek term applied to male sinners, tax collectors, Pharisees, and the prodigal son, is rendered consistently as 罪 throughout Luke. This asymmetry is not a translation error but an ideological choice: where male transgression is theologized as sin standing before God, female transgression is behavioralized as moral misconduct measured against social expectation (Patessio, 2011, p. 87; Saeki, 1998, p. 112). The distinction carries its own literary afterlife, which will be addressed in the following section.

Taken together, these findings establish the first half of the paper's central claim: that the Meiji NT produced a Japanese rendering of sin that was simultaneously more stable, more pervasive, and more legally weighted than its Greek source warranted. The second half of that claim requires examining what the translation did not stabilize, the vocabulary of grace.

Discussion

The corpus findings of the previous section establish only half of the paper's argument. To demonstrate that the Meiji NT produced not merely a heavy sin vocabulary but a structurally asymmetric moral framework, it is necessary to examine how the translation handled the corresponding vocabulary of grace. The Greek *charis*, theologically the counterweight to hamartia, the term Paul deploys in Romans 5:20 precisely to exceed and overcome sin's dominion, appears 157 times in the New Testament. In the four Gospels alone, its rendering is strikingly unstable: John 1:14 and 1:17 use 恩寵 (onchō, hierarchical divine favor), Romans 5:20 and 6:14 use 恩 (on, social obligation and gratitude debt), Luke 1:30 uses 恵 (megumi, domestic blessing), and Luke 2:52 does not render *charis* as any grace-term at all, substituting 愛せられたり (aisera retari, was beloved), absorbing grace entirely into the affective register (Arichea, 1978, pp. 201–203). Where 罪 achieved normalization and overextension, *charis* achieved neither. The translators gave Japanese readers a stable, legally weighted word for sin and four unstable, socially weighted approximations for grace. The asymmetry was structural, not incidental.

Table 4*Overextension Cases, Greek Terms Outside Hamartia Rendered as Tsumi*

Gospel	Verse	Greek term	Standard meaning	Meiji rendering
Matthew	7:1	κρίνετε	judge	罪を定める
Matthew	12:37	καταδικασθήσῃ	condemned	罪ありとせらるる
Matthew	23:33	κρίσεως	sentence	刑罪
Matthew	27:37	αἰτίαν	charge	罪標
Mark	12:40	κρίμα	condemnation	罪せらるること
Luke	6:37	καταδικάζετε	condemn	罪すること
John	3:17	κρίνη	condemn	罪を定む
John	8:34	ἁμαρτίαν	sin	惡 (aku)

This asymmetry did not remain confined to the Bible. The vocabulary established by the 1880 NT circulated outward through the entire ecosystem of Meiji Protestant literature—apologetics tracts, catechisms, missionary school curricula, and women's journals. Okuno Masatsuna's 1888 translation of Ferdinand Genahr's catechetical work *Byōshuku mondō* (病床問答, “Sickbed Dialogues”), a question-and-answer text designed to guide the dying toward confession and repentance, exemplifies this wider print environment: it draws directly on the tsumi vocabulary fixed by the NT translation while offering none of the doctrinal scaffolding that might have tempered it (Okuno, 1888). Each repetition could reinforce the tsumi-heavy, grace-thin moral framework without reproducing the theological context that might have balanced it (Gluck, 1985, p. 171; Twine, 1991, p. 34). More broadly, studies of Meiji literary translation emphasize translation as an active process of reception and transformation within the formation of modern Japanese literature (Katō, 2009). As Twine has shown, the standardization of written Japanese during the Meiji period locked this vocabulary into the literary language at the precise moment of its formation. By the time Protestant moral vocabulary reached writers of the Taishō and Shōwa periods, it had become sufficiently naturalized that its Christian origin was invisible, which is precisely Venuti's point about the ideological invisibility of translation choices over time (Venuti, 1995, pp. 1–2). A writer could inherit the structure of Protestant guilt without inheriting the Protestant theology of redemption.

Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku* (1948/1952) is the clearest literary demonstration of what that inheritance looks like. The novel's moral vocabulary is saturated with the guilt cluster the Meiji NT established: 罪 (*tsumi*, sin/crime), 罰 (*batsu*, punishment), 恥 (*haji*, shame), 地獄 (*jigoku*, hell). What is structurally absent is the grace counterpart. When Yōzō meditates on the antonym of crime—「罪に就ての反対語は何だ」 (“What is the antonym of crime?”)—he cannot locate it. He runs through prayer, repentance, confession, and finds them all synonymous with crime rather than opposite to it (Dazai, 1948/1952, p. 138). This is not a psychological portrait of one damaged man. It is the logical endpoint of a translation that gave Japanese literary language a fully elaborated vocabulary for sin and an unstable, fragmented vocabulary for grace. Yōzō cannot find the antonym of 罪 because the Meiji NT did not give him one. More precisely: the passage that should have given him one, Romans 5:20, where grace is said to abound beyond sin's increase, rendered *charis* as 恩, a word whose primary register is social obligation rather than unearned redemption. The theological architecture of guilt without grace was built into the language before Dazai was born (Tomasi, 2021, pp. 114–118; Williams, 2003, pp. 310–312).

Conclusion

The translation of hamartia as 罪 (tsumi) in the 1880 Meiji New Testament was not a failure of equivalence but an institutional act with consequences that exceeded its agents' intentions. By normalizing 罪 as the target-language solution for an entire punitive semantic field, absorbing Greek terms for judgment, condemnation, legal charge, and trespass alongside hamartia itself, the Meiji translators encoded into modern Japanese literary language a moral framework weighted decisively toward guilt and divine judgment. The parallel analysis of charis (grace) reveals the structural asymmetry that gave this encoding its force: where 罪 achieved normalization and overextension, grace fragmented across four distinct Japanese renderings, 恩寵, 恩, 恵, and the affective substitution 愛せられたり, none of which acquired comparable doctrinal stability. The Meiji NT gave Japanese readers a fully elaborated vocabulary for sin and an unstable, socially inflected approximation for grace.

The literary consequences of that asymmetry are legible across the seventy years separating the 1880 translation from Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku* (1948). Dazai's Yōzō cannot locate the antonym of 罪 not because he is psychologically damaged beyond the reach of theology, but because the language he inherited had not supplied one. The moral vocabulary available to him, 罪, 罰, 恥, 地獄, is precisely the vocabulary the Meiji NT stabilized and overextended. What is absent, a stable, theologically weighted term for unearned redemptive grace, is precisely what the Meiji translators failed to establish. The guilt without grace that the paper's title names is not Dazai's personal condition. It is the condition of a literary language shaped by a translation that built the architecture of Protestant sin into Japanese moral vocabulary while leaving Protestant grace structurally homeless.

Translation is never a neutral transfer. The Meiji Bible's mediation of sin demonstrates that it is a structuring act, one whose ideological consequences become invisible precisely as they become naturalized, and whose effects on literary imagination may outlast by generations any conscious engagement with the religious tradition that first produced them (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57; Venuti, 1995, pp. 1–2).

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