

How to Read the Bible

LESSON TWO

for All Its Worth

The Basic Tool: A Good Translation

Why Are There So Many Bible Versions?

The Bibles that we have in front of us today are the result of years of toil and even bloodshed. Many men and women have lost their lives so that we might have an accurate translation of God's Word from which to read. The original autographs written by divinely-inspired men have passed from existence. The oldest manuscripts we now possess are copies of copies of copies...

Obviously, for the typical man or woman in America to read the Word, we need a translation into our native language, English. The Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language with a little bit of Aramaic (an international trade language similar to Hebrew). The New Testament was entirely written in Greek. Different versions arise from differing opinions on which old manuscripts should be used (called Textual Criticism) and how you will translate them to English (called Translation Theory). The trouble with only having one translation is that you are committed to their translation choices, for better or for worse. For that reason, it is beneficial to understand the principles of Bible translations so that you can make a rationale decision on which translation(s) you will use, and under what circumstances you will use them.

I do want to note that the writers of our text are VERY partial to the New International Version (NIV) and the Functional Equivalence (aka Dynamic Equivalence) translation technique. At least one of the authors is a member of the Committee for Bible Translation responsible for the 2011 NIV. I do not agree with all the statements the authors make in this chapter. I will attempt to make this lesson as unbiased as possible.

Before we begin, I will provide the following chart as a reference to the various acronyms used for modern-English Bible translations.

KJV	King James Version 1611	NIV	New International Version 1973	PHILLIPS	Phillips Bible 1958
NKJV	New King James Version 1982	NEB	New English Bible 1961	GNB	Good News Bible (Today's English Version) 1976
NAB	New American Bible 1970	RSV	Revised Standard Version 1952	LB	Living Bible 1971
NASB	New American Standard Bible 1995	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version 1991	JB	Jerusalem Bible 1966
ESV	English Standard Version 2001	HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible 2003	MSG	The Message 2002

Textual Criticism

Textual Criticism is the method by which we determine what the original manuscripts actually said. The copies passed down from generation to generation do contain some errors that we must discern and distinguish so that we can make sure our text is reliable as possible. Before we get started with this discussion, I want to highlight an important point:

"...the verbal agreement between various New Testament manuscripts is closer than between many English translations of the New Testament and that the actual number of variants in the New Testament is small (approximately 10 percent), none of which affect any matter of doctrine. The greatest number of variants are differences or errors in spelling." – [The Journey from Text to Translation](#) (pg. 213)

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When we consider the differences in texts and how to determine which one is reliable, scholars look at both external and internal evidence. The external evidence considers the age and origin of the source. Is it a parchment, codex (a full book), or quotation of a text? Where did it come from and who was likely to have written it? Is it older (closer to the source) or more recent? These questions help us to determine how much weight to give the specific source. Internal evidence considers why the variations in text are there at all. Where do these mistakes come from? Let's consider three common reasons and look at some examples.

1. Transcription errors (spelling or punctuation)

Most of these errors are obvious and can be corrected without causing any confusion at all. However, some misspellings can imply a different word that might cause a difference in the text. See the following example:

1 Samuel 8:16

KJV – “And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work.”

NASB – “...and your best young men and your donkeys and use them for his work.”

ESV – “...and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work.”

Note: The ESV contains a footnote indicating the alternate reading of “cattle”

NIV – “...the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use.”

LB – “...finest of your youth and will use your animals for his personal gain”

The word translated as “young men” in the Hebrew has one letter difference from the word for “cattle”. Looking at the flow of the passage, the word cattle makes more sense because it is unlikely Samuel would mention the best of the young men between the servants and the donkeys. It is interesting to note that the Jewish scholars who translated the Septuagint¹ used the word “cattle” instead of “young men” in this passage. How did this error occur? It is likely that someone copied the word down incorrectly and it carried forward as copies were made of the erroneous copy.

2. “Corrections” by the transcriber

Occasionally, transcribers would come across something in the text they felt that they could “improve” on. Below is an example of such phenomena:

Mark 1:2-3

KJV – “As it is written in the prophets, Behold I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

NASB – “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:...”

ESV – “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: ...”

Note: The ESV contains a footnote indicating the alternate reading of “the prophets”

NIV – “It is written in Isaiah the prophet: ...”

LB – “In the book written by the prophet Isaiah ...”

¹The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament that existed in Jesus' day.

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Mark 1:2-3 quotes portions of both Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. The oldest and most respected manuscripts read “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet”; however the manuscript used by the KJV states, “As it is written in the prophets”. What happened and why? It is possible that a scribe noted that the passage quotes more than Isaiah and therefore changed the text to read “the prophets”. The original text was not incorrect; Isaiah was quoted. There are several New Testament passages that do not specifically quote the Old Testament writer (i.e. Mark 12:10-11)

3. Attempts to prove doctrinal points

Some versions of the Bible have been written for the express purpose of backing up some sort of doctrinal belief. This practice predates modern Bible version; there is evidence of this occurring in Greek manuscripts as well.

1 John 5:7-8

KJV – “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.”

NASB – “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.”

Note: The NASB contains a footnote identifying the alternate reading.

ESV – “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.”

NIV – “For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.”

LB – “So we have these three witnesses: the voice of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, the voice from heaven at Christ's baptism, and the voice before he died. And they all say the same thing: that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

The additional text in the KJV supports the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine we embrace. However, no Greek manuscript supports the reading dating earlier than the fourteenth century. It appeared in some old Latin texts in the 7th century and seems to have made its way into later Greek texts. Additionally, even when the early church debated the issue of the Trinity, no early writers ever quoted this passage. If this passage were in the original manuscripts and copies, it no doubt would have been quoted as the Trinitarians argued their point. This provides very strong evidence that the additional language was not in the original text. It appears someone added it to further an agenda. There are plenty of other passages in Scripture that prove the doctrine of the Trinity and it is never necessary to distort the Word of God to prove a point. In fact, adding these words obscures the true intention of the passage.

Translation Techniques

Your beliefs on translation technique will probably determine which translation of the Bible you favor. There are three basic philosophies of translation technique that we will consider: 1) Formal Equivalence; 2) Functional Equivalence; and 3) Free Translation. The reason this is even an issue is because we are translating scriptures from the original language to our receptor language (English). Should we try to be as literal as possible or should we just try to get the main idea across? Unfortunately, the difference between Hebrew and Greek and modern English are significant and simply providing a word-for-word translation would not yield a coherent result. Consider the following examples:

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Isaiah 53:10

YLT² - “And Jehovah hath delighted to bruise him, He hath made him sick, If his soul doth make an offering for guilt, He seeth seed--he prolongeth days, And the pleasure of Jehovah in his hand doth prosper.”

KJV - “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put *him* to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see *his* seed, he shall prolong *his* days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.”

ESV - “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.”

Mark 1:7

YLT - “and he proclaimed, saying, `He doth come--who is mightier than I--after me, of whom I am not worthy--having stooped down--to loose the latchet of his sandals;”

KJV - “And preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.”

ESV - “And he preached saying, ‘After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.’”

Literal translations don’t always render a result that is clear in English. This is because Hebrew and Greek languages are very expressive and contain nuance that isn’t translated clearly in a word-for-word rendering. Translation decisions have to be made. Do you try to stay as close to the original words and flow as possible (Formal Equivalence), interpret the point of the passage and convey it in simple English (Free Translation), or pick something in between (Functional Equivalence)? What are the pros and cons of each?

Formal Equivalence (Literal)

Seeks to stay as close as possible to the exact words and phrases in the original language and yet retain readable English. This theory of translation is often called “literal” because of the word-for-word emphasis.

Pros: A very reliable translation (typically uses italics for words not in original) and word studies are meaningful

Cons: It can take more study to understand and sometimes has awkward wording.

Free Translation

Seeks to translate general ideas into common, everyday language.

Pros: The most readable translation and it can be insightful.

Cons: Because the translator is interpreting the passage for you, it becomes a commentary. Word studies are meaningless. The result of the translator assuming the role of an interpreter of scripture is many inaccuracies.

² Note: The literal translations are taken from Young’s Literal Translation.

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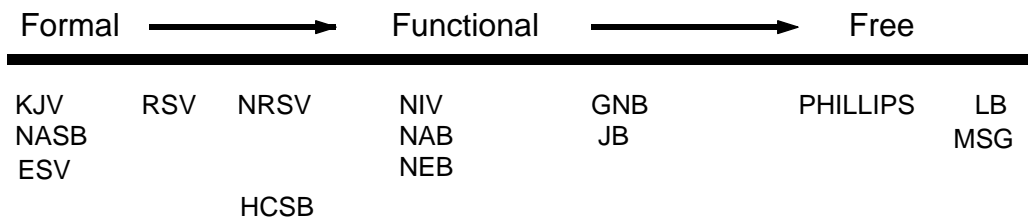
Functional Equivalence (aka Dynamic Equivalence)

Seeks to translate words, idioms, and grammatical constructions from the original language to precise equivalents in the receptor language.

Pros: Tries to be literal where possible but emphasizes readability over a literal rendering.

Cons: You never know whether you are reading a literal or paraphrased translation

The following chart shows where some popular versions fall amongst the translation techniques:



Let's look at the translation theories in practice. Consider the following translations of 1 Timothy 1:5.

1 Timothy 1:5

Formal Equivalence Translations

KJV: Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned:

ESV: The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Functional Equivalence Translations

HCSB: Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.³

NIV: The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Free Translations

NLT: The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a genuine faith.

MSG: The whole point of what we're urging is simply love – love uncontaminated by self-interest and counterfeit faith, a life open to God.

³ HCSB is considered an optimal equivalence translation, a cross between formal and functional equivalence.

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Translation Challenges

There are a few issues that present unique challenges to translators who are charged with bridging the gap between not only languages, but cultures and time. We identify a few of the more significant challenges below. Consider how the theories of translation affect the translators' decisions on these issues.

1. Weights, Measures, Money

The Hebrew system of measure consisted of units such as cubits, spans, ephahs, omers, etc.... The English system of measurement consists of feet, miles, pounds, dollars (or pence and pounds for our British friends), bushels, etc.... Note that the international system of measurement (the metric system) is entirely different. How do you convey the units of weight, measure, and money from the Scriptures into equivalent terms your audience can understand? Do you even try? Here are a few examples of the various translation theories in action in Matthew 18:24 and 28.

KJV: "And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents... and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him an hundred pence..."

ESV: "When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents... he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii..."

NIV: "As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him... he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins..."

MSG: "As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars... he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars..."

Notice that each of these translations made different choices. The KJV left the initial monetary unit in Roman terms (a talent), but translated the latter into pence, a British monetary unit. The ESV kept both units in the Biblical monetary system. The NIV tried to convert the monetary units into concepts that could be translated across cultures. Finally, the Message converted the difference between the sums into generalized American currency. They are not intended to be actual conversions.

2. Euphemisms

A euphemism is a generally acceptable word or expression used instead one that might be found to be more offensive. We find that what is acceptable in one culture is not acceptable in another. How should these delicate phrases be translated? Here is an example from 1 Kings 21:21.

KJV: "Behold, I will bring evil upon thee, and will take away thy posterity, and will cut off from Ahab him that pisseth against the wall, and him that is shut up and left in Israel,"

NASB: "Behold, I will bring evil upon you, and will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, both bond and free in Israel;"

NIV: "He says, 'I am going to bring disaster on you. I will wipe out your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free.'"

MSG: "'I will most certainly bring doom upon you, make mincemeat of your descendants, kill off every sorry male wretch who's even remotely connected with the name Ahab.'"

The KJV retains a literal rendering of a Hebrew phrase "him that pisseth against the wall", indicating males. Each of the other modern translations (even the NASB), uses the English euphemism "male"

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rather than create the mental imagery that accompanies the literal translation. Though it may have been a common description in Old Testament times, it is not common today and would be considered vulgar.

3. Vocabulary

When choosing a word in the receptor language, do you choose a word that is the equivalent of the word in the original language or a word that expresses the thought you believe is behind the original word? We will begin to see more of a distinction in the translation theories in their handling of Romans 1:3.

KJV: “Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh;”

ESV: “concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh”

NIV: “regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David,”

NLT: “The Good News is about his Son. In his earthly life he was born into King David’s family line,”

Contrast this with how each of the versions then translates Romans 7:18.

KJV: “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.”

ESV: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”

NIV: “For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”

NLT: “And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t.”

Note that Romans 1:3 and 7:18 contain the same word, “flesh”. However it is translated into different phrases in the NIV (functional equivalence) and NLT (formal equivalence) translations. While you may agree with the sentiment conveyed in their translations, you would not know that the translation involved such a significant amount of interpretation if you relied upon these versions alone.

4. Word Play

Even children learn basic word play in their native language. Words that rhyme, puns, homophones (i.e. knew and new)... all of these are examples of word play that conveys meaning on more than one level. While they are not common, there are examples of word play in the original Biblical languages. Unfortunately, word plays are often lost in translation. How hard should a translator try to retain these? At what point do you lose the meaning of the text if you try too hard? Consider Amos 8:2.

KJV: “And he said, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A basket of summer fruit. Then said the Lord unto me, The end is come upon my people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more.”

ESV: “And he said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the Lord said to me, “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them.”

NIV: ““What do you see, Amos?” he asked. “A basket of ripe fruit,” I answered. Then the Lord said to me, “The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.”

MSG: “He said, “What do you see, Amos?” I said, “A bowl of fresh, ripe fruit.” God said, “Right. So, I’m calling it quits with my people Israel. I’m no longer acting as if everything is just fine.””

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The word for “summer” (qa-yis) is very similar to “the end” (qes) in Hebrew. This was a word play used by the Lord to connect the example of the basket of fruit that had reached the end of its growth and was now ready to be eaten. The formal equivalence translations (KJV and ESV) simply translated the meanings of the words literally and did not try to include the word play. The NIV found a clever way of translating this passage using the word “ripe”. The Message seemed to miss the mark entirely in my opinion. While the NIV translators found an equivalent word play in this passage, it isn’t always possible to do and attempting to do so can muddle the meaning.

5. Grammar and Syntax

If you have ever learned a foreign language, chances are you noticed sentence constructions that are different from what you have learned growing up. Translators must decide how to convey the equivalent meaning of a passage from one set of grammar rules into another. One such distinctive of Greek is its tendency to lean heavily upon the genitive construction (showing possession). When the genitive is translated, the translators must determine who or what the possessor is and what is possessed. Consider how the KJV, NASB, and NIV translate 1 Corinthians 3:9.

KJV: “For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building.”

NASB: “For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

NIV: “For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

Notice how the underlined portions differ. As a reader, you need to recognize that interpretive decisions are made by translators, regardless of which version you read. Formal equivalents tend to make fewer interpretive decisions than functional equivalents, but interpretations remain. This is a strong argument for not limiting yourself to one translation as you read and study Scripture.

6. Matters of Gender

Considerations of gender can be touchy in our politically correct culture. Such considerations have influenced some modern-day translators in their choice of words when translating words that imply gender into English. Specifically, the Hebrew and Greek often use the term “man” when referring to men and women. I don’t believe it is intended to be sexist. Adam was the first created being and Eve was derived from him, just as we all were. To speak of “man” in a general sense is to speak to all of us. Nevertheless, this term remains offensive or confusing to some and therefore translations from the functional equivalent and free perspective often translate them differently. Consider the various translations of Psalm 1:1 below.

KJV: “Blessed is the man That walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor standeth in the way of sinners, Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.”

ESV: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;”

NIV: “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,”

MSG: “How well God must like you— you don’t hang out at Sin Saloon, you don’t slink along Dead-End Road, you don’t go to Smart-Mouth College.”

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The distinctions are obvious. In my opinion, the translators of the NIV have started down a slippery slope. By translating “man” (which I believe to be a gender-neutral use of the word) into “one”, they take too much of a role as interpreter and fail to provide the reader the opportunity to learn the important theological implications of using the word “man” to refer to all of mankind. The translation has gone beyond conveying the truth in modern English into trying to translate Biblical truth into the unbiblical construct of American culture. ***Culture should be shaped by truth; truth should not be shaped by culture.*** The 2011 NIV has gone farther down this path than the previous 1984 and original 1978 translations and I expect it to continue farther down this path in the future.

Which Translation Should I Use?

While this can be a touchy subject, I hope that the discussion and examples above have stimulated your thinking and helped you to understand the rationale behind the diverse translations that exist today. In my opinion, there is not a perfect translation of Scripture because language is a fluid thing and translation requires interpretation. Yet, the Word of God is perfect, alive, and powerful. It is able to convict us to the core and convert the soul by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Consider Jesus. The Word in flesh came in human form and experienced the weakness of humanity, even suffering death on the cross. Yet, His life and death were more than typical because of the Divine nature inside of Him. He even had power to bring His earthly body back to life after He was crucified. His power shined through the cloak of humanity and touched all who had eyes to see and ears to hear. The same remains true with the written Word. Every translation that makes a serious attempt to adhere to the original texts can be used by God to reach the lost and edify the saint. God’s truth shines through.

With that said, some translations are better than others and they can be useful for different purposes. Consider the different situations described below. Which type(s) of translations do you believe to be most appropriate for these settings? Why?

Study / Church Use (Preaching / Teaching)

It is my personal conviction that serious study and formal church ministry (teaching and preaching) should be based upon strong formal equivalent translations (KJV, NASB, ESV, NKJV). Word studies are most meaningful in a formal equivalent translation. Also, when we stand and proclaim God’s Word, we need to be as close to the original intent as possible. Some of the liberties taken in the functional equivalent make me uncertain as to their use in this context. For that reason, I also recommend a literal translation for memorization.

Casual Reading or Devotional

Any version you can clearly understand can be useful for casual reading or devotional. However a functional equivalent (NIV, HCSB) may be especially useful in this setting. They are highly readable, fairly accurate, and may provide a slightly different take on a passage that can stimulate you useful meditation upon God’s Word.

Commentary

Any version is useful for comparison purposes, but the free translations (LB, Phillips, CEV, MSG) tend to function more as a commentary than other versions. While they may have use as a commentary, I would never lean upon one as my primary source.