



Gordon Fee and Mark Strauss

Foreword by Craig Blomberg

IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME

TRANSLATING GOD'S WORD INTO TODAY'S LANGUAGE





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International Bible Society

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Translations

American Standard Version (ASV)
Contemporary English Version (CEV)
English Standard Version (ESV)
God's Word (GW)
Good News Translation (GNT)
Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)
Jerusalem Bible (JB)
King James Version (KJV)
Living Bible (LB)
The Message
New American Bible (NAB)
New American Standard Bible (NASB)
New Century Version (NCV)
New English Bible (NEB)
New English Translation (NET)
New International Version (NIV)
New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)
New King James Version (NKJV)
New Living Translation (NLT)
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
Revised English Bible (REB)
Revised Standard Version (RSV)
Tanakh
Today's New International Version (Today's NIV)

Foreword

Never before in the history of humanity have there been as many different translations of the Bible into as many different languages. Even in English alone, there is a bewildering array of options that one may consult. What are the differences among these options? What principles guided the various versions or translations? What are their respective strengths and weaknesses?

This booklet is an adaptation of the first two chapters of Gordon Fee's and Mark Strauss's wonderful little primer, *How to Translate the Bible for All Its Worth*. Both authors are members of the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) that years ago produced the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible and its most recent update, Today's NIV (TNIV). They make the case that translations like Today's NIV that mediate between formal and functional equivalence in their philosophy stand the best chance of communicating God's word both accurately and clearly to the broadest cross-section of the reading public. As one who joined the CBT in 2008, I would concur.

In this adaptation, we learn why neither a strictly word-for-word nor an entirely phrase-by-phrase approach is sufficient for translating one language into another. We are reminded that only the original Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic of the Scriptures were inspired, so that the translator's job involves re-creating the best possible combination of original intent, textual meaning and impact on readers. But there will always be various legitimate options under each of these headings. And we are given an abundance of good illustrations, both from modern foreign languages and from Scripture of the authors' various principles. Particularly helpful is a chart that places the major, current English translations of the Bible on a spectrum from most formally equivalent to most functionally equivalent.

Readers looking for insight on more specific kinds of problems for Bible translators will have to get the entire book by Fee and Strauss. But a surprising number of key issues involved in understanding why translations differ and in choosing a Bible translation (or choosing several, depending on one's purposes in any given context) do receive clear, accurate, succinct and helpful treatment here. I warmly recommend this introduction to the issues to any interested readers.

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Littleton, CO

Part One

Bible Translation: Why? What? How?

Many years ago a much-admired teacher of Greek stood before her first-year Greek class. With uncharacteristic vigor, she held up her Greek New Testament and said forcefully, “*This* is the New Testament; everything else is a translation.” While that statement itself needs some qualification, the fact that it is still remembered fifty-plus years later by a student in that class says something about the impact that moment had in his own understanding of the Bible. For the first time, and as yet without the tools to do much about it, he was confronted both with the significance of the Greek New Testament and with the need for a careful rendering of the Greek into truly equivalent—and meaningful—English. And at that point in time he hadn’t even attended his first Hebrew (or Aramaic) class!

Our aim in this short booklet is to help readers of the Bible understand the *why*, the *what*, and the *how* of translating the Bible into English. It will be clear in the pages that follow that we think the best of all worlds is to be found in a translation that aims to be accurate regarding meaning, while using language that is normal English.

The **Why** of Bible Translation

The question of “why biblical translation” seems so self-evident that one might legitimately ask “why talk about *why*?” The first answer, of course, is the theological one. Along with the large number of believers who consider themselves evangelicals, the authors of this book share the conviction that the Bible is God’s word—his message to human beings. So why a pamphlet about translating Scripture into English? Precisely because we believe so strongly that Scripture is *God’s word*.

But we also believe that God in his grace has given us his word in very real historical contexts, and in none of those contexts was English the language of divine communication. After all, when Scripture was first given, English did not yet exist as a language. The divine word rather came to us primarily in two ancient languages—Hebrew (with some Aramaic) and Greek, primarily “Koine” Greek. The latter was not a grandiose language of the elite, but “common” Greek, the language of everyday life in the first-century Roman world.

The third answer to “why do we need biblical translation” lies with a reality that might seem obvious to all, but which is often misunderstood. This is the reality that languages really do differ from one another—even cognate languages (i.e., “related” languages such as Spanish and Italian, or German and Dutch). The task of translation

is to transfer the meaning of words and sentences from one language (the *original* or *source* language = the language of the text being translated) into meaningful words and sentences of a second language (known as the *receptor* or *target* language), which in our case is English. At issue ultimately is the need to be faithful to *both* languages—that is, to reproduce faithfully the meaning of the original text, but to do so with language that is comprehensible, clear, and natural.

As we will see, this means that a simple “word-for-word” transfer from one language to the other is inadequate. If someone were to translate the French phrase *petit déjeuner* into “word-for-word” English, they would say “little lunch”; but the phrase actually means “breakfast.” Similarly, a *pomme de terre* in French is not an “apple of earth,” as a literal translation would suggest, but a “potato.” Since no one would think of translating word-for-word in these cases, neither should they imagine that one can simply put English words above the Hebrew words in the Old Testament or the Greek words in the New, and have anything that is meaningful in the receptor language. After all, the majority of words do not have “meaning” on their own, but only in the context of other words.

Knowing “words” is simply not enough; and anyone who uses an “interlinear Bible,” where a corresponding English word sits above the Greek word, is by definition not using a translation, but is using a “crib” that can have some interesting—and, frankly, some unfortunate—results.

Thus the *why* of biblical translation is self-evident. The Bible is God’s word, given in human words at specific times in history. But the majority of English-speaking people do not know Hebrew or Greek. To read and understand the Bible they need the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words and sentences of the Bible to be transferred into meaningful and equivalent English words and sentences.

The **What** of Bible Translation

The ultimate concern of translation is to put a Hebrew or Greek sentence into *meaningful English that is equivalent to its meaning in Hebrew or Greek*. That is, the goal of good translation is *English*, not *Greeklish* (or *Biblish*). *Biblish* results when the translator simply replaces Hebrew or Greek words with English ones, without sufficient concern for natural or idiomatic English. For example, the very literal American Standard Version (ASV) translates Jesus’ words in Mark 4:30 as, “How shall we liken the kingdom of God? or in what parable shall we set it forth?” This is almost a word-for-word translation, but it is unnatural English. No normal English speaker would say, “In what parable shall we set it forth?” Today’s NIV translates, “What parable

shall we use to describe it?" The formal structure of the Greek must be changed to reproduce normal, idiomatic English.

At issue, therefore, in a good translation is where one puts the emphasis: (1) on imitating as closely as possible the words and grammar of the Hebrew or Greek text, or (2) on producing idiomatic, natural-sounding English. Or is there some balance between these two? In Part Two we will introduce technical terms for, and a fuller explanation of, these approaches to translation.

While we believe that there is a place for different translation theories or approaches, we think the best translation into English is one where the translators have tried to be truly faithful to both languages—the source language and the receptor language. In any case, the task of translating into English requires expertise in both languages, since the translator must first comprehend how the biblical text would have been understood by its original readers, and must then determine how best to communicate this message to those whose first language is English.

The **How** of Bible Translation

The *how* question concerns the manner in which translators go about their task. Here several issues come to the fore. First, has the translation been done by a committee or by a single individual? While some translations by individuals have found a permanent place on our shelves, there is a kind of corrective that comes from work by a committee that tends to produce a better final product.

Second, if the translation was produced by a committee, what kind of representation did the committee have? Was there a broad enough diversity of denominational and theological backgrounds so that pet points of view seldom won the day? Did the committee have representation of both men and women? Was there a broad range of ages and life experiences? Did the committee have members who were recognized experts in each of the biblical languages and in the matters of textual criticism regarding the transmission of both the Hebrew and Greek Bible? Were there English stylists on the committee who could distinguish truly natural English from archaic language?

Third, if translation decisions were made by a committee, what was the process of deciding between competing points of view? Was the choice made by simple majority, or did it require something closer to a two-thirds or three-quarters majority in order to become part of the final version of the translation?

At issue ultimately is the need to be faithful to *both* languages.

While the majority of readers of this book will not have easy access to the answers to these questions, most modern versions have a preface that gives some of the information needed. It is good to read these prefaces, so as to have a general idea of both the make-up of the committee and of the translational theory followed.

In recent years there has emerged a great deal of debate over which of these kinds of translation has the greater value—or in some cases, which is more “faithful” to the inspired text. But “faithful” in this case is, as with “beauty,” often in the eye of the beholder. Still, there are significant differences in the basic methods used to produce English Bible translations. We believe that a translation based on “functional equivalence” is the best way to be fair to both the original and receptor languages. The reasons for this will become clear in Part Two below.

Part Two

What Makes for Excellence in Bible Translation?

There is a common perception among many Bible readers that the most accurate Bible translation is a “literal” one. By literal they usually mean one that is “word-for-word,” that is, one that reproduces the *form* of the original Greek or Hebrew text as closely as possible. Yet anyone who has ever studied a foreign language soon learns that this is mistaken. Take, for example, the Spanish sentence, *¿Cómo se llama?* A literal (word-for-word) translation would be,

“How yourself call?” Yet any first-year Spanish student knows that is a poor translation. The sentence means (in good idiomatic English) “What’s your name?” The *form* must be changed to express the *meaning*.

Consider another example. The German sentence *Ich habe Hunger* means, literally, “I have hunger.” Yet no English speaker would say this.

They would say, “I’m hungry.” Again, the form has to change to reproduce the meaning. These simple examples (and thousands could be added from any language) illustrate a fundamental principle of translation: *The goal of translation is to reproduce the meaning of the text, not the form.* The reason for this is that no two languages are the same in terms of word meanings, grammatical constructions, or idioms.

The goal of translation is to reproduce the meaning of the text, not the form.

What is true for translation in general is true for Bible translation. Trying to reproduce the form of the biblical text frequently results in a distortion of its meaning. The Greek text of Matthew 1:18, translated literally, says that before her marriage to Joseph, Mary was discovered to be “having in belly” (*en gastri echousa*). This Greek idiom means she was “pregnant.” Translating literally would make a text that was clear and natural to its original readers into one that is strange and obscure to English ears. Psalm 12:2, translated literally from the Hebrew, says that wicked people speak “with a heart and a heart” (or, as some “literal” versions render it, “with a double heart”). This Hebrew idiom means “deceitfully.” Translating literally obscures the meaning for most readers. The form must be changed in order to reproduce the meaning.

Two Approaches to Translation: Form or Function?

Corresponding to this distinction between form and meaning are two basic approaches to translation, known by the technical terms *formal equivalence* and *functional equivalence*.

Formal Equivalence

Formal equivalence, also known as “literal” or “word-for-word” translation, seeks to retain the *form* of the Hebrew or Greek while producing basically understandable English. This goal is pursued for both words and grammar. Concerning words, formal equivalent versions try to use the same English word for a particular Greek or Hebrew word whenever possible (this is called *lexical concordance*). For example, formal equivalent versions like the NASB and NKJV seek to translate the Greek term *sarx* consistently with the English word “flesh.” Complete lexical concordance is impossible, however, since Hebrew, Greek, and English words often have different ranges of meanings. Sometimes *sarx* does not mean “flesh,” and even these concordant versions render it with other English words like “life” or “body.”

Formal equivalence also seeks to reproduce the grammar or syntax of the original text as closely as possible (this is called *syntactic correspondence*). If the Greek or Hebrew text uses an infinitive, the English translation will use an infinitive. When the Greek or Hebrew has a prepositional phrase, so will the English. Again, this goal cannot be achieved perfectly, since some grammatical forms don't exist in English (like certain uses of the Greek genitive case or the Hebrew waw-consecutive), and others function differently from their English counterparts. Nonetheless, the goal of this translational theory is *formal* correspondence as much as possible.

Functional Equivalence

While formal equivalence follows the *form* of the original text, functional equivalence, also known as idiomatic or meaning-based translation, seeks to reproduce its *meaning* in good idiomatic (natural) English. *Functional equivalence* was originally called *dynamic equivalence*. Both terms were coined by Eugene Nida, a pioneer in linguistics and Bible translation. Advocates of functional equivalence stress that the translation should sound as clear and natural to the contemporary reader as the original text sounded to the original readers. Consider 2 Samuel 18:25, where King David inquires about a messenger arriving with news from a battle:

“If he is alone, there is news in his mouth.” (NKJV, ESV)

“If he is alone, there are tidings in his mouth.” (NRSV)

“If he is alone, he must have good news.” (Today’s NIV)

“If he is alone, he is bringing good news.” (GNT, NCV)

The Hebrew idiom “news in his mouth,” translated literally in the NKJV and the ESV, is awkward English. In fact, no native English speaker would ever use this expression. The NRSV is even worse, with the archaic “tidings in his mouth.” What sounded natural to the original readers now sounds archaic and unnatural. Today’s NIV and other idiomatic versions (cf. GNT, NCV) use more natural English to express the meaning of the Hebrew.

Consider also Matthew 5:2, where Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount:

“Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying” (NKJV)

“And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying” (ESV)

“and he began to teach them.” (Today’s NIV, NCV)

The Greek idiom uses two phrases, *anoigo to stoma* (“open the mouth”) + *didasko* (“teach”), to express a single action. For the Greek reader opening the mouth and teaching were not two consecutive actions, but one act of speaking (see Acts 8:35; 10:34; Rev. 13:6). The functional equivalent versions (Today’s NIV, NCV) recognize this idiom and so accurately render the Greek, “he began to teach them.” The more literal NKJV and the ESV are understandable, but they miss the Greek idiom and so introduce an unnatural English expression.

In functional equivalent versions, words are translated according to their meaning in context rather than according to lexical concordance. For example, a functional equivalent version would translate *sarx* with different English terms (“human being,” “body,” “sinful nature,” etc.) depending on its meaning in context. In Luke 3:6, literal versions render *sarx* as “flesh”: “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (NASB, ESV, NKJV, NRSV). Since the meaning here is “people” or “humanity,” functional equivalent versions render it this way:

“And all people will see God’s salvation.” (Today’s NIV)
 “and then all people will see the salvation sent from God.” (NLT)
 “And all mankind will see God’s salvation.” (NIV)
 “and all humanity will see the salvation of God.” (NET)
 “and everyone will see the salvation of God.” (HCSB)

This example illustrates a fundamental principle of functional equivalence: accuracy concerns the *meaning* of the text rather than its form. Although *sarx* is translated with four different words in these five versions (people, mankind, humanity, everyone), the meaning is the same. Accuracy in translation relates to equivalent meaning, not equivalent form.

All Bible versions lie on a spectrum between form and function. Below is a chart showing approximately where the most widely-used English versions lie.

Even translations that *claim* to be literal constantly modify Hebrew and Greek forms to express the meaning of the text.

Translation Spectrum

Formal Equivalent			Mediating				Functional Equivalent		
NASB	KJV	RSV	NAB	NIV	JB	NEB	GNT	LB	
	NKJV	ESV	NRSV	Today’s NIV	NJB	REB	NLT	CEV	
		Tanakh	HCSB	NET		GW	NCV	The Message	

Notice that in addition to formal and functional versions we have introduced a third category, *mediating*, which represents a middle ground between these two. Mediating versions like Today’s NIV, NAB, HCSB, and NET are sometimes more literal, sometimes more idiomatic, seeking to maintain a balance between form and function.

Which to Choose?

So which translation method is best? While the goal of literal translation—to preserve the original words of Scripture—is a noble one in theory, in practice it simply doesn’t work. This is because Hebrew and Greek words, phrases, and idioms are very different from English words, phrases, and idioms.

Even translations that *claim* to be essentially literal constantly modify Hebrew and Greek forms to express the meaning of the text. Consider the Greek phrase that begins Mark’s Gospel: *Archē tou euangeliou Iēsou Christou* (Mark 1:1). Most beginning Greek

Translation is more than the simple replacement of words.

students would consider this to be simple Greek, which can be translated, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (NASB, ESV, NKJV, HCSB, NIV, NET). Yet even this is not a “literal” translation. The Greek grammatical forms are NOUN + GENITIVE PHRASE + GENITIVE PHRASE. The grammatical forms of the English translation are DEFINITE ARTICLE + NOUN + PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE + PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE. Almost all of the grammatical forms were changed to produce this supposedly “literal” translation. Furthermore, the phrase could have been translated, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah” (Today’s NIV). What seems at first to be a simple and direct translation is in fact an *interpretation* using different English forms to express the same meaning. This kind of interpretation occurs in almost every sentence in the Bible.

So while formal equivalent translators try to proceed with a *method* of formal equivalence (word-for-word replacement), their decisions are in fact determined by a *philosophy* of functional equivalence (change the form whenever necessary to retain the meaning). The problem is that by focusing first on form, the result is often “Biblish”—an awkward and obscure cross between Bible language (Hebrew and Greek idioms) and real English. No one speaking English in the real world would use an expression like “there is news in his mouth” or “he opened his mouth and taught them.”

Such examples confirm that, in principle at least, a functional equivalent approach—one that focuses on meaning first—is superior to a formal equivalent, or “literal,” approach. We are promoting the view that *the best translation is one that remains faithful to the original meaning of the text, but uses language that sounds as clear and natural to the modern reader as the Hebrew or Greek did to the original readers*. Another way to say this is that the best translation retains historical distance when it comes to history and culture (enabling the reader to enter the ancient world of the text), but eliminates that distance when it comes to language (using words and phrases that are clear and natural English). As we will see, there are many challenges in producing a translation that is *both* accurate *and* readable.

Although functional equivalence represents the best overall approach, there is great benefit in using more than one version. This is because no version can capture all of the meaning, and different versions capture different facets of meaning. It is especially helpful to use versions from across the translation spectrum: *formal*, *functional*, and *mediating*. A good mediating version (Today’s NIV, NET, NAB, HCSB) is probably the best overall version for one’s primary

Bible, since it maintains a nice balance, achieving readability while retaining important formal features of the text. The formal equivalent versions (NRSV, NASB, ESV) are helpful tools for detailed study, since they seek to retain the structure, idioms, verbal allusions, and ambiguities of the original text. Great benefit can also be gained from the functional equivalent versions (NLT, NCV, GNT, CEV, GW), since these use natural English and so provide fresh eyes on the text.

We must always remember that the Bible is God's *word*—his message to us. And a message is of no use unless it is actually understood. All translation should be *meaningful* translation.

The recognition that a translation must ultimately focus on meaning over form is nothing new, and translators throughout history have grappled with this issue. The original preface to the King James Version of 1611 discusses the question of whether one English word should be chosen for each Greek or Hebrew word. The translators noted: "We have not tied ourselves to a uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words, as some peradventure would wish that we had done ... For is the kingdom of God become words or syllables?" These translators, who produced the most enduring English version of all time, recognized that the message of the kingdom of God was more than just words on a page; it was the meaning those words conveyed.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, translated the Bible into his vernacular German. In reflecting on the process of translating the Old Testament, he wrote:

I must let the literal words go and try to learn how the German says that which the Hebrew expresses ... Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather he must see to it—once he understands the Hebrew author—that he concentrates on the sense of the text, asking himself, "Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation?" ... Let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows.¹

Martin Luther understood that translation was not just about *replacing words*, but about *reproducing meaning*.

All Translation Is Interpretation

If the goal of translation is to reproduce the meaning of the text, then it follows that all translation involves interpretation. Some people say, "Just tell me what the Bible says, not what it means." The problem with this is that "what the Bible says" is in Hebrew and Greek, and

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1960), 35:193.

there is seldom a one-to-one correspondence between English and these languages. Before we can translate a single word, we must interpret its meaning in context. Of course it is even more complicated than that, since words get their meaning in dynamic relationship with other words. Every phrase, clause, and idiom must be interpreted in context before it can be translated accurately into English.

Translation is, therefore, always a two-step process: (1) Translators must first interpret the meaning of the text in its original context. Context here means not only the surrounding words and phrases, but also the genre (literary form) of the document, the life situation of the author and the original readers, and the assumptions that these authors and readers would have brought to the text. (2) Once the text is accurately understood, the translator must ask, How is this meaning best conveyed in the receptor language? What words, phrases, and idioms most accurately reproduce the author's message? Translation is more than a simple replacement of words.

Since all translation involves interpretation, it follows that no translation is perfect. There will always be different interpretations of certain words and phrases, and no Bible version will always get it right. Furthermore, differences between languages mean that every translation represents an approximation of the original meaning. We have a saying in English, "Something was lost in translation," and this is certainly true. Something, however subtle, is regularly lost in translation because no two languages are identical.

Throughout history this inability to translate perfectly has been recognized by translators—often with fear and trembling. An old Italian proverb says, *Traduttore traditore*, meaning "The translator is a traitor!" Although this play on words is certainly an exaggeration, it contains a measure of truth. Every translation "betrays" the original text because it is impossible to communicate all of the meaning with perfect clarity. Rabbi Judah is reported to have said, "If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar; if he adds thereto, he is a blasphemer, and a slanderer" (*b. Kiddushin 49a*). You can hear the translator's frustration. Literal translation can distort the meaning of the text, but idiomatic translation risks introducing the wrong meaning!

Yet Bible readers must not despair. Although meaning can never be reproduced *perfectly*, it can be rendered *truly*, that is, with a high degree of accuracy. What Bible readers need to take from this is that all Bible versions—no matter how accurate—have certain limitations. These can be overcome by (1) using more than one version to gain a better perspective; (2) reading larger units of text to determine the greater context and flow of thought; (3) checking good commentaries on difficult passages; and (4) gaining a better knowledge of the world of the Bible through studies of its background and culture.

Students of God's word have a wealth of resources available today that help to clarify the meaning of the text—more than at any time in history. We also believe in the doctrine of the “perspicuity of Scripture.” This means that God has revealed himself clearly through his word and it will be understandable to those who are willing to take the time to read and study it carefully with their hearts and their minds.

Isn't That Just a “Paraphrase”?

A comment should be made here about the word “paraphrase,” since it is one of the most misunderstood and misused words with reference to Bible translation. The term is often used in a derogatory sense of a translation that is highly idiomatic and so (by implication) misses the meaning of the original. People will say, “Isn't that just a paraphrase?” and mean “That is not a *real* translation—it's too free.” The problem with this definition is that it starts with the incorrect assumption that an accurate translation is necessarily a literal one, and thus an idiomatic one is inaccurate.

As we have seen, however, the opposite can be true. “What is your name?” is an idiomatic translation of *¿Cómo se llama?* but it is also accurate. “How yourself call?” is a literal translation, but it is inaccurate. An accurate translation is one that reproduces the *meaning* of the text, regardless of whether it follows the *form*. This realization makes the popular definition of “paraphrase” subjective and unhelpful. It would be better to use the term in a neutral sense, meaning “to say the same thing in different words, usually for the sake of clarification or simplification.” By this definition *all translations* paraphrase to one degree or another, since all change Hebrew and Greek words into English ones to make the text understandable. The important question then becomes not whether the text paraphrases, but whether it gets the meaning right.

We should also note that linguists sometimes use “paraphrase” in a third sense, contrasting it with “translation.” While “translation” is transferring a message *from one language to another*, paraphrase is rewording a message in the *same language*. By this definition, The Living Bible is a true paraphrase, since Kenneth Taylor started with an English version (the American Standard Version) and reworded and simplified it.

Other functional equivalent versions would be true translations, since

An accurate translation is one that reproduces the *meaning* of the text, regardless of whether it follows the *form*.

they were rendered not from an English version but directly from the Hebrew and Greek.

Original Meaning and Contemporary Relevance

Closely related to the question of form versus meaning is that of *original meaning versus contemporary relevance*. We have referred already to the issue of historical distance. The Bible was written not only in different languages from ours, but in a different time and place. All versions seek to cross the bridge of time and make the message understandable to modern readers. Some place greater stress on the original meaning, others on the contemporary relevance.

On the “Translation Spectrum” chart above, we placed The Message, an engaging version produced by Eugene Peterson, on the far right side. This version is certainly idiomatic since it freely changes the form of the original text. But there is another factor at work here: whether a translation places greater emphasis on the original meaning or its contemporary significance. The Message has been called “a ‘translation of tone’ ... bridging the gap between the original languages and English, and between centuries of time and language change, to bring to us the New Testament as it originally sounded.”² In other words, The Message intentionally eliminates historical distance not only with reference to language but also with reference to time and culture.

For example, in Matthew 23:27 Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being “whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead” (Today’s NIV). Both formal and functional equivalent versions refer here to “whitewashed tombs” or something similar (NLT, CEV, GNT, GW, NCV, etc.). But in The Message Jesus says to the Pharisees, “You’re like manicured grave plots, grass clipped and the flowers bright, but six feet down it’s all rotting bones and worm-eaten flesh.” A modern cemetery,

rather than a first-century rock-hewn tomb, is now in view.

This goes beyond translation to *transculturation*. While the goal of translation is to carry the modern reader back into the world of the text, transculturation brings the text to the modern reader, contemporizing it for today. The goal is less about original meaning

and more about contemporary relevance. Like functional equivalent

The goal of translation is to carry the modern reader back into the world of the text.

² See <http://www.navpress.com/BibleProducts/HistoryAndFaqs/#05>.

versions, The Message seeks to use clear and idiomatic English. But it goes beyond functional equivalence, whose primary goal is equivalent *meaning*, by seeking to provoke in modern readers an equivalent *response*. Peterson's intent was to recapture the tone, to bring out the subtleties and nuances of the Hebrew and Greek languages while keeping a sense of firsthand experience for contemporary readers. Peterson often asked himself, "If Paul were the pastor of my church, how would he say this?" or "If Jesus were here teaching, what would it sound like?" Notice that the question is not, "What was Jesus' message to his first-century readers?" but rather, "If Jesus were here teaching, what would it sound like?"

Other recent examples of transculturation include *Black Bible Chronicles* by P. K. McCary (1993) and Rob Lacey's *The Word on the Street* (2003). Both of these, in different ways, seek to transfer the message of the Bible into the language of the inner city. In doing so, they are willing to sacrifice the original context and culture of the Bible to sound fresh and relevant.

Just as all Bible versions lie on a spectrum between form and function, so all also lie on a spectrum between original meaning and contemporary relevance. Even the most literal versions at times contemporize the message to make it understandable for today's readers. For example, all of the formal equivalent versions on the chart above (except the KJV) read in Luke 24:13 that Emmaus was "seven miles" from Jerusalem, even though the Greek says that the town was "sixty *stadia*" away (a *stadium* was about six hundred feet). These versions have contemporized here and elsewhere by converting a Greek measurement into an English one.

The Goals of Formal, Functional, and Mediating Versions

One way to categorize the difference between the translation philosophies discussed above is to ask how far translators are willing to go in modifying the form of the Hebrew or Greek to communicate the meaning. As we have seen, all translations—even the most literal—alter Greek and Hebrew forms in order to communicate meaning. So what's the difference?

The answer seems to be that different philosophies of translation have different goals in mind. *Formal equivalent* versions seek to modify Hebrew and Greek forms until the text is *comprehensible*. *Mediating* versions modify forms until the text is *clear*. *Functional equivalent* (or idiomatic) versions modify the form until the text is *natural*. The following chart illustrates this, adding various strengths and weaknesses of each translation type.

	Formal Equivalence (literal)	Mediating	Functional Equivalence (idiomatic)
Goal	Comprehension: Alter the form until the text is <i>comprehensible</i> .	Clarity: Alter the form until the text is <i>clear</i> .	Naturalness: Alter the form until the text is <i>natural</i> .
Examples	KJV, NKJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV	Today's NIV, NAB, NJB, HCSB, NET	NLT, NCV, GNT, GW, CEV
Strengths	Helps to capture metaphors, verbal allusions, and ambiguities.	Achieves both accuracy and clarity.	Greatest comprehension. Communicates the message clearly and naturally.
Weaknesses	Can result in awkward English, obscurity, and inaccuracy. Comprehension test often fails.	More interpretation, so greater margin for interpretive error. Sometimes uses unnatural English.	Even more interpretation, so greater margin for error. Sometimes loses nuances of meaning in pursuit of simplicity and clarity.

Translation and the Doctrine of Inspiration

One of the surprising, and from our perspective unfortunate, recent developments in the story of English translations is the reappearance of an old argument that “literal” versions are more compatible with the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of Scripture. We say “old,” because this is precisely what drove Robert Young (best known for his analytical concordance to the KJV) to produce a version vis-à-vis the KJV (first ed. 1862). In keeping with the historic expression of that doctrine, Young argued: “This inspiration extends only to the original text, *as it came from the pens of the writers*, not to any translation ever made by man, however aged, venerable, or good; and only in so far as any of these adhere to the original” (*italics original*). With this we would agree. But then he added, “neither adding to nor omitting from it one particle,” by which he meant that

if a translation gives a *present tense* when the original gives a *past*, or a *past* when it has a *present* ... an *a* for a *the*, or a *the* for an *a*, an *imperative* for a *subjunctive*, or a *subjunctive* for an *imperative*; a verb for a noun, or a noun for a verb, it is clear that verbal inspiration is as much overlooked as if it had not existed. THE WORD OF GOD IS MADE VOID BY THE TRADITIONS OF MEN. A *strictly literal* rendering may not be so pleasant to the ear as one where the *apparent sense* is chiefly aimed at, yet

it is not *euphony* but *truth* that ought to be sought, and where in such a version as the one commonly in use in this country [the KJV!], there are scarcely *two consecutive verses* where there is not some departure from the original such as those indicated . . . it is difficult to see how verbal inspiration can be of the least practical use to those who depend upon that version alone.³

His own “translation” of a randomly selected verse (2 Sam. 19:38) reads: “With me doth Chimham go over, and I do to him that which *is good* in thine eyes, yea, all that thou dost fix on me I do to thee.” While this is surely “literal” gone off kilter, few readers today would say it is also “accurate.”

Our first point, then, is that, as with beauty, “literal” is in the eye of the beholder, in this case meaning “in the perception of the user.” This is why we have tried to avoid the word “literal” in this booklet and have often put it in quote marks when we use it—because those who use it tend to have such a wide range of meanings. Unfortunately, it is also often used in the literature simply as a rhetorical device over against “meaning-based” versions.

Second, much of this rhetoric represents a poor understanding of the doctrine of verbal inspiration, which historically does not refer to the words as “words in themselves,” but “words as they convey meaning.” It is precisely at this point that we would argue that a translation that places the priority of *meaning* over *form* is much more in keeping with the doctrine of inspiration, since at issue always is the “meaning” of the inspired words. The translation that best conveys that meaning is the most faithful to this historic doctrine.

A comparison between the doctrine of sacred Scripture in Christianity and Islam might be helpful here. The Muslim view of divine inspiration limits Allah’s revelation to the *Arabic words* of the Koran. Translations of the Koran into other languages are not inspired scripture; they are “commentary.” This is why we hear Muslim children reciting the Koran in Arabic, even when they do not know Arabic and have no idea what it means.

But that is not the Christian doctrine of divine inspiration, which concerns not words in isolation, but the *meaning* of those words in context. When lecturing on Bible translation, one of the authors often holds up an English Bible and asks the audience, “Is this God’s word?” The answer is a resounding “Yes!” This is absolutely true. An English translation remains God’s word when it faithfully reproduces the meaning of the text. And since languages differ in terms of word

³ Robert Young, “Preface to the Revised Edition” (no page number; italics and capitals in original). This book has been published by a variety of publishers since the mid-1800s.

meanings, grammatical constructions, and idioms, translation can never be about simply replacing words. The Hebrew and Greek text must first be interpreted—word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase, clause-by-clause—to determine the original meaning. Then this meaning must be painstakingly reproduced using *different* words, phrases, and clauses in English. The translation that most closely adheres to the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture is the one that reproduces *the total meaning* of the text, not just its words.

Standards of Excellence in Translation

Having examined the nature of Bible translation, we can summarize four key criteria for excellence in translation. The best translation should be accurate, clear, natural, and audience-appropriate. As we will see, these criteria can sometimes be in tension, and no single version will always accomplish them all.

Accurate

By accurate we mean that a translation reflects the meaning of the original text as closely as possible. It should transport modern readers back to the world of the Bible, enabling them to hear the message as the original readers heard it.

Although accuracy relates primarily to properly transferring the linguistic meaning of the forms of the biblical languages, it also relates to biblical history and culture. Every book in the Bible was written at a particular place and time, and a translation should seek to reproduce the foreignness of the text.

Readers of the Gospels, for example, should experience the world of Jesus and first-century Judaism. In Matthew 23:5 Jesus criticizes the Pharisees because “everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long” (Today’s NIV). Phylacteries were small boxes with quotes from the Scriptures inside, which pious Jews wore on their foreheads and arms to literally obey Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18. Tassels on robes are commanded in Numbers 15:38–39 and Deuteronomy 22:12. These things were an important part of first-century Jewish religious life, so a good translation will seek to retain them.

Functional equivalent versions often provide explanatory phrases for this verse. The NLT reads, “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels” (cf. GNT, CEV, NCV). The historical meaning is retained, but an explanatory phrase is used instead of the less commonly known technical term “phylacteries.” The Message, however, intentionally avoids the cultural meaning by translating, “Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered

prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next.” This rendering creates vivid relevance, but at the expense of historical accuracy.

Accuracy also relates to genre or literary form. The translation of a New Testament epistle should read like a first-century letter, and an Old Testament narrative should read like an ancient story. Perhaps the greatest challenge here concerns Old Testament poetry, since poetry works not only through the meaning of words and phrases, but also through its aesthetic qualities. It is often difficult or impossible to preserve a wordplay in Hebrew or Greek or to duplicate the rhythm of a poetic section.

Reproducing the style of the original is also part of accuracy. A text written in a higher register or more formal literary style in Hebrew or Greek should be translated into a more formal English style. (“Register” here refers to the type of language used in a particular social situation or when communicating with a particular set of people. Language with a “higher register” is directed toward those with a larger vocabulary and greater competence in that language.) Similarly, a more colloquial or conversational style of Hebrew or Greek should be rendered that way in English. Mark’s Gospel is fairly rough Semitic (Jewish style) Greek, while Luke’s Gospel is a more formal Hellenistic literary style. As much as possible, a translation should reflect these differences.

One important clarification is necessary here. Register, or reading level, is not the same as translation philosophy. In other words, a translation done at a high register is not necessarily a literal one. Great works of English literature may be written at a very high register, that is, with complex vocabulary and sentence structure, but they do not sound like literal translations. Translations done at a high register should still sound like *English*, not *Biblish*, but they are free to draw more deeply from the rich resources of English vocabulary, style, and idiom. Mediating versions, like the NET Bible, Today’s NIV, NJB, NAB, and REB, tend to be translated at a higher register than their functional equivalent counterparts.

Clear

A second important criterion for excellence in translation is *clarity*. While a Bible translation should transport the reader to a different time and place, it should do so with language that is clear and understandable. Obscure and awkward language may remind students that they are reading a “foreign” text, but it also moves the reader further from the original intent of the author, compromising

The translation of a New Testament epistle should read like a first-century letter.

the accuracy of the translation. This is because the original (in most cases) sounded clear and natural to the original readers. The exception to this is when a text is intentionally ambiguous, in which case the translation should seek to retain the same measure of ambiguity as the original.

Clarity can be compromised by consistently translating a Hebrew or Greek form with the same English form. One of the most problematic of these is the Greek genitive case. Beginning Greek students are often told to translate the genitive with the preposition “of,” as in the phrase “the word *of God*” (*ho logos tou theou*). Here *tou theou* (“of God”) is a genitive construction. The problem is that while many genitive constructions in the New Testament can be translated with “of + NOUN,” others cannot. Consider these translations of genitive constructions (in italics) in formal equivalent versions:

“you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.”

(Eph. 1:13 NKJV)

“he [Christ] upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

(Heb. 1:3 ESV)

“I pray . . . that you will know what is the hope of His calling.”

(Eph. 1:18 NASB)

While in many cases the preposition “of” is a perfectly acceptable translation, in these examples it results in an obscure or misleading translation. What, for example, does “the Holy Spirit of promise” mean? The meaning of this phrase is the Holy Spirit *who was promised*, or “the promised Holy Spirit” (Today’s NIV, NET, HCSB, NAB, ESV). We have here what grammarians refer to as an attributive

genitive. Similarly, in Hebrews 1:3 the ESV’s “word of his power” is nonsensical (word that his power possesses?). This is another attributive genitive, meaning “his powerful word” (Today’s NIV, NET, HCSB, GNT, NRSV). The NASB’s “hope of His calling” in Ephesians 1:18 seems to suggest that believers hope they will be called by God. But believers are already called! The

genitive here means “the hope to which you were called” (Today’s NIV, NRSV, ESV).

Consistent use of the preposition “of” to translate the genitive case represents a misguided attempt at literalism. Clarity in translation demands that the translator consider carefully the meaning of the text in each particular context.

In these examples readers might be able to work out the meaning of the genitive by reflecting on the sentence. “The word of his

¿Cómo se llama? can be literally translated as “How yourself call?” but this is inaccurate and unclear.

power” is perhaps comprehensible, but it is far from *clear*. Earlier we used the Spanish example *¿Cómo se llama?* No translator would render this in a strict literal manner, “How yourself call?” But in an attempt to stay literal one might say, “How do you call yourself?” While this translation is (barely) comprehensible, it is certainly not clear. Any normal English speaker would say, “What’s your name?” Formal equivalent versions have a tendency to alter the forms of the original until they are just comprehensible. Unfortunately, what is comprehensible to a translator may be obscure, awkward, or even meaningless to the average reader.

Clarity can also refer to making explicit what is implicit in the Hebrew or Greek text. This is particularly important when the original readers would have immediately recognized the implicit meaning, but many modern readers would not. In the example of tassels cited earlier (Matt. 23:5), the Greek literally reads “they enlarge the tassels.” Today’s NIV and other versions—including a number of literal ones—clarify that these are the tassels “of their garments” (cf. GNT, KJV, NKJV, NASB). Similarly, in Luke 18:13, the tax collector in the temple “beats his chest” as he prays. The NLT clarifies that he beat his chest “in sorrow.”

The opening phrase of Luke 1:26, “In the sixth month . . .” is open to misunderstanding. Is this the sixth month of the year or the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy? The context makes it clear that it is the latter, but a reader could easily miss this. A number of versions, therefore, clarify by translating “In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy” (Today’s NIV, NET, NLT, GNT, GW). By clarifying the meaning of the text these versions have made the translation more precise and so more accurate.

Natural

Clarity concerns whether a text is readily understandable. A translation may be clear, however, but not natural. A missionary who was translating the Bible for a tribal language in Guatemala often asked his tribal consultants whether a particular phrase he had translated was clear to them. They would usually say “Yes.” But if he then asked, “Is that how you would say it?” they would laugh and say “No!” They would then give him an idiomatic alternative. The translation may have made sense, but it was not natural. Consider various English translations of Acts 11:22, where the church in Jerusalem hears about missionary success in Antioch:

“The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem.”
(ESV; cf. NKJV, NASB)

“News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem.”
(Today’s NIV; cf. HCSB)

“A report about them came to the attention of the church in Jerusalem.” (NET)

“When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened.” (NLT)

“The church in Jerusalem heard about all of this.” (NCV)

None of these versions is actually word-for-word. The Greek, translated literally, is something like “but the word was heard into the ears of the church, the one being in Jerusalem . . .” All of the versions significantly modify the Greek forms. Yet both the formal (ESV, NKJV, NASB) and mediating versions (Today’s NIV, HCSB; except NET) retain the Greek idiom “the ears of the church” (*ta ōta tēs ekklēsiās*). While this phrase is comprehensible, it is not normal English. No one would ever say “this came to my ears,” but rather “I heard about this,” or “the news reached me.” What sounded natural to the original hearers sounds odd and awkward in the translation.

Examples like this create tension for the translator. By using normal idiomatic English, translators risk missing something in the original meaning. But if they stay literal, they risk obscurity and inaccuracy. In either case nuances can be lost (remember: something is always lost in the translation). This is especially sobering when we consider this is God’s inspired word—his message to humanity.

Translators bear a great responsibility to get it right. J. B. Phillips, who produced an idiomatic English version some sixty years ago, recognized the gravity of this task. He wrote that while translating the New Testament he “felt rather like an electrician rewiring an ancient house without being able to turn the mains off.”⁴ In this climate, translators must practice balance, discernment, and a good dose of humility when making these difficult decisions.

Audience-Appropriate

A final criterion for excellence in translation serves as a qualifier for the other three. A translation should be appropriate for its intended audience. We must remember that the ultimate goal of translation is not to transfer words from one page to another, but to communicate a message from one person to another. A translation is truly successful only when its readers (or hearers) actually get that message.

This immediately confirms the need for different kinds of translations. It also confirms that the first task of translators is to determine who their target audience is. This could be children, young people, adults, churchgoers, unchurched people, new believers, or those for whom English is a second language. Ideally, one version would be perfect for everyone. But this is usually not possible. No Bible

⁴ J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), xii.

version can do everything, and the wealth of resources available today should be viewed as an asset rather than a liability.

Conclusion

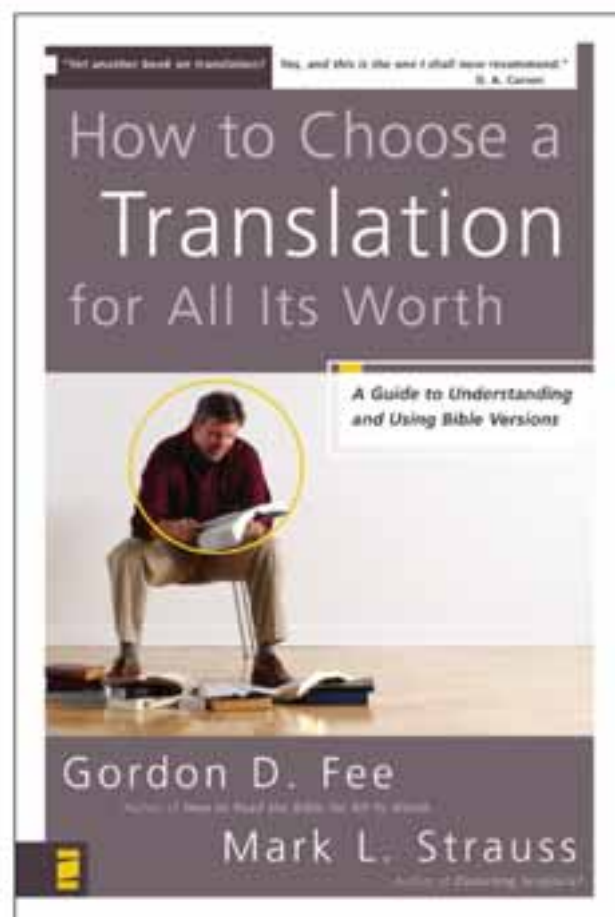
It is with all these standards of excellence in mind that the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) worked diligently to produce Today's NIV. (The CBT is the self-governing body that oversees the text of Today's NIV.) The Committee describes its vision for Bible translation with these fitting words for our conclusion:

From the beginning the translators have been united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God's Word in written form. For them, the Bible contains the divine answer to the deepest needs of humanity, sheds unique light on our path in a dark world and sets forth the way to our eternal well-being. Out of this deep conviction, the Committee has held to certain goals for the NIV and for the present revision: that it would be an accurate translation and one that would have clarity and literary quality and so prove suitable for public and private reading, teaching, preaching, memorizing and liturgical use. The Committee has also sought to preserve a measure of continuity with the long tradition of translating the Scriptures into English.

There is a sense in which the work of translating the Bible is never finished. This very fact has prompted the Committee to engage in an ongoing review of the text of the NIV with the assistance of many other scholars. The chief goal of this review has always been to keep the text of the NIV abreast of contemporary biblical scholarship and of shifts in English idiom and usage. Already in 1978 and again in 1984 various corrections and revisions to the NIV text were made. In Today's NIV the Committee offers to the reading public the latest fruits of its review.

. . . The Committee has again been reminded that every human effort is flawed—including this revision of the NIV. We trust, however, that many will find in it an improved representation of the word of God, through which they hear his call to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and to service in his kingdom. We offer this version of the Bible to him in whose name and for whose glory it has been made.

(Taken from *A Word to the Reader*, Today's NIV, CBT, 2003)



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Psalm 1

My tongue will praise you, O Lord,
your presence all day long.
For the domain of justice
is the domain of the Lord.
I have a message from God to my people,
concerning the wicked and the just.
There is no fear of God
to those who spit words,
but those who do not speak
lies will not be afraid of the Lord.
The words of the wicked are like chaff,
and they will be blown away.
The words of the just are like silver,
and they will be treasured up.
The Lord will not forget the just,
but the wicked will be forgotten.
The just will be like a tree,
planted by the water.
They will bear fruit
all year long, and their leaves
will not wither.
The just will be like a tree,
planted by the water.
They will bear fruit
all year long, and their leaves
will not wither.
The just will be like a tree,
planted by the water.
They will bear fruit
all year long, and their leaves
will not wither.

Psalm 37

Do not fret because of those who are evil,
or be provoked by those who do wrong,
for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.

Trust in the Lord, and you will be blessed,
and you will be like a tree,
planted by the water.
The just will be like a tree,
planted by the water.
They will bear fruit
all year long, and their leaves
will not wither.
The just will be like a tree,
planted by the water.
They will bear fruit
all year long, and their leaves
will not wither.
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