

CHAPTER 2

The Basic Tool: A Good Translation

The sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible were originally written in three different languages: Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic (a sister language to Hebrew used in half of Daniel and two passages in Ezra), and Greek (all of the New Testament). We assume that most of the readers of this book do not know these languages. This means, therefore, that one's basic tool for reading and studying the Bible is a contemporary English translation or, as will be argued in this chapter, *several* such translations.

As we noted in the last chapter, the very fact that you are reading God's Word in translation means that you are already involved in interpretation — and this is so whether one likes it or not. To read in translation is not a bad thing, of course; it is simply the only thing available and therefore the necessary thing. What this means further, however, is that, in a certain sense, the person who reads the Bible only in English is at the mercy of the translator(s), and translators have often had to make choices as to what in fact the original Hebrew or Greek

author was really intending to express.

The trouble, then, with using only *one* translation, be it ever so good, is that you are thereby committed to the particular exegetical choices of that translation as the Word of God. The translation you are using will, of course, be correct most of the time; but at times it also may not be.

Let's take, for example, the following four translations of 1 Corinthians 7:36:

NKJV: "If any man thinks that he is behaving improperly toward his virgin . . ."

NASB: "If any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter . . ."

NIV: "If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to . . ."

NEB: "If a man has a partner in celibacy and feels that he is not behaving properly towards her . . ."

The NKJV is very literal but not very helpful, since it leaves the term "virgin" and the relationship between the "man" and "his virgin" quite ambiguous. Of one item, however, you may be absolutely certain: Paul did not *intend* to be ambiguous. He intended one of the other three options, and the Corinthians, who had raised the problem in their letter, knew which one; indeed they knew nothing of the other two.

It should be noted here that none of these other three is a *bad* translation, since any of them is a legitimate option as to Paul's intent. However, only one of them can be the *correct* translation. The problem is which one? For a number of reasons, the NIV reflects the best exegetical option here (in fact the NEB reading is now a marginal note in the newer REB). However, if you regularly read only the NASB (which also has

a less likely option here), then you are committed to an *interpretation* of the text that is quite unlikely to be what Paul intended. And this kind of example can be illustrated hundreds of times over. So, what to do?

First, it is probably a good practice to regularly read one main translation, provided it really is a good one. This will aid in memorization as well as give you consistency. Also, if you are using one of the better translations, it will have notes in the margin at many of the places where there are difficulties. However, for the *study* of the Bible, you should use *several* well-chosen translations. The best option is to use translations that *one knows in advance will tend to differ*. This will highlight where many of the difficult problems of interpretation lie. To resolve these matters you will usually want to consult one or more commentaries.

But which translation should you use, and which of the several should you study from? No one can really speak for someone else on this matter. But your choice should not be simply because “I like it” or “This one is so readable.” You should indeed like your translation, and if it is a really good one, it will be readable. However, to make an intelligent choice, you need to know something about the science of translation itself as well as about some of the various English translations.

THE SCIENCE OF TRANSLATION

There are two kinds of choices that translators must make: textual and linguistic. The first kind has to do with the actual wording of the original text. The second has to do with the translators’ theory of translation that underlies their rendering of the text into English.

The Question of Text

The first concern of translators is to be sure that the Hebrew or Greek text they are using is as close as possible to the original wording as it left the author's hands (or the hands of the scribe taking it down by dictation). Is this what the psalmist actually wrote? Are these the very words of Mark or Paul? Indeed, why should anyone think otherwise?

Although the details of the problem of text in the Old and New Testaments differ, the basic concerns are the same. (1) Unlike Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," for example, whose handwritten original is preserved in America's national archives, no such handwritten "original" exists for any biblical book. (2) What does exist are thousands of copies produced by hand (thus called "manuscripts") and copied repeatedly over a period of about 1,400 years (for the NT; even longer for the OT). (3) Although the vast majority of manuscripts, which for both Testaments come from the later medieval period, are very much alike, for the New Testament these later manuscripts differ significantly from the earlier copies and translations. In fact, there are over five thousand Greek manuscripts of part or all of the New Testament, as well as thousands in Latin; and because these hand copies were made before the invention of the printing press (which helped guarantee uniformity), no two of them anywhere in existence are exactly alike.

The problem, therefore, is to sift through all the available material, compare the places where the manuscripts differ (these are called "variants"), and determine which of the variants represent errors and which one most likely represents the original text. Although this may seem like an imposing task

— and in some ways it is — translators do not despair, because they also know something about textual criticism, the science that attempts to discover the original texts of ancient documents.

It is not our purpose here to give the reader a primer in textual criticism. This you may find in convenient form in the articles by Bruce Waltke (Old Testament) and Gordon Fee (New Testament) in volume 1 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank Gaebelin [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979], pp. 211 – 22, 419 – 33). Our purpose here is to give some basic information about what is involved in textual criticism so that you will know why translators must do it and so that you can make better sense of the marginal notes in your translation that say, “Other ancient authorities add . . .” or, “Some manuscripts do not have . . .”

For the purposes of this chapter, you need to be aware of two items:

1. *Textual criticism is a science that works with careful controls.* There are two kinds of evidence that translators consider in making textual choices: external evidence (the character and quality of the manuscripts) and the internal evidence (the kinds of mistakes to which copyists were susceptible). Scholars sometimes differ as to how much weight they give either of these strands of evidence, but all are agreed that the combination of strong external and strong internal evidence together makes the vast majority of choices somewhat routine. But for the remainder, where these two lines of evidence seem to collide, the choices are more difficult. The *external evidence* has to do with the quality and age of the manuscripts that support a given variant. For the Old Testament this often amounts to a choice among the Hebrew

manuscripts preserved in the Masoretic Text (MT), primarily medieval copies (based on a very careful copying tradition), earlier Hebrew manuscripts that have been preserved, in part, in the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS; dated before the first Christian century), and manuscripts of ancient translations such as the Greek Septuagint (LXX; produced in Egypt around 250 – 150 BC). A well-preserved copy of Isaiah found among the Dead Sea Scrolls has demonstrated that the Masoretic tradition has carefully preserved a very ancient text; nonetheless, it often needs emendation from the Septuagint. Sometimes neither the Hebrew nor Greek yields a tolerable sense, at which times conjectures are necessary.

For the New Testament, the better external evidence was preserved in Egypt, where again, a very reliable copying tradition existed. When this early evidence is also supported by equally early evidence from other sectors of the Roman Empire, such evidence is usually seen to be conclusive.

The *internal evidence* has to do with the copyists and authors. When translators are faced with a choice between two or more variants, they usually can detect which readings are the mistakes because scribal habits and tendencies have been carefully analyzed by scholars and are now well-known. Usually the variant that best explains how all the others came about is the one presumed to be the original text. It is also important for the translator to know a given biblical author's style and vocabulary, because these, too, play a role in making textual choices.

As already noted, for the vast majority of variants found among the manuscripts, the best (or good) external evidence combined with the best internal evidence yields us an extraordinarily high degree of certainty about the original text.

This may be illustrated thousands of times over simply by comparing the NKJV (which is based on poor, late manuscripts) with almost all other contemporary translations, such as the NRSV or NIV. We will note three variants as illustrations of the work of textual criticism:

1 Samuel 8:16

NKJV/NASB: “he will take . . . your finest young men and your donkeys”

NRSV/NIV: “he will take . . . the best of your cattle and donkeys”

The text of the NRSV/NIV (“your cattle”) comes from the Septuagint, the usually reliable Greek translation of the Old Testament. The NKJV/NASB follows the Masoretic Text, reading “young men,” a rather unlikely term to be used in parallel to “donkeys.” The origin of the miscopy in the Hebrew text, which the NKJV followed, is easy to understand. The expression for “your young men” in Hebrew is *bḥwrykm*, while “your cattle” is *bqrykm* (they are as much alike as “television” and “telephone” — i.e., the error could not have been oral). The incorrect copying of a single character by a scribe resulted in a change of meaning. The Septuagint was translated some time before the miscopy was made, so it preserved the original “your cattle.” The accidental change to “your young men” was made later, affecting medieval Hebrew manuscripts, but too late to affect the premedieval Septuagint.

Mark 1:2

NKJV: “As it is written in the Prophets . . .”

NIV: “as it is written in Isaiah the prophet . . .”

The text of the NIV is found in all the best early Greek

manuscripts. It is also the only text found in all the earliest (second-century) translations (Latin, Coptic, and Syriac) and is the only text known among all but one of the church fathers before the ninth century. It is easy to see what happened in the later Greek manuscripts. Since the citation that follows is a combination of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3, a later copyist “corrected” Mark’s original text to make it more precise.

1 Corinthians 6:20

NKJV: “therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

NIV: “Therefore honor God with your bodies.”

This example was chosen to illustrate that, on occasion, changes to the original text were made by copyists for theological reasons. The words “and in your spirit, which are God’s,” though found in most of the late-medieval Greek manuscripts, do not appear in any early Greek evidence or in the Latin-speaking church in the West. Had they been in Paul’s original letter, it is nearly impossible to explain either how or why copyists would have left them out so early and so often. But their late appearance in Greek manuscripts can be easily explained. All such manuscripts were copied in monasteries at a time when Greek philosophy, with its low view of the body, had made inroads into Christian theology. So, some monks added “in your spirit” and then concluded that both body and spirit “are God’s.” While this is true, these additional words deflect Paul’s obvious concern with the body in this passage and are thus no part of the Spirit’s inspiration of the apostle.

It should be noted here that, for the most part, translators work from Greek and Hebrew texts edited by careful, rigorous

scholarship. For the New Testament this means that the “best text” has been edited and published by scholars who are experts in this field. But it also means, for both Testaments, that the translators themselves have access to an “apparatus” (textual information in footnotes) that includes the significant variants along with their manuscript support.

2. *Although textual criticism is a science, it is not an exact science, because it deals with many human variables.* Occasionally, especially when the translation is the work of a committee, the translators will themselves be divided as to which variant represents the original text and which is (are) the scribal error(s). Usually at such times the majority choice will be found in the actual translation, while the minority choice will be in the margin.

The reason for the uncertainty may be either that the best manuscript evidence conflicts with the best explanation of how the error came about, or that the manuscript evidence is evenly divided and either variant can explain how the other came to be. We can illustrate this from 1 Corinthians 13:3, which in the 1984 NIV looks like this:

NIV text 1984:	“surrender my body to the flames”
NIV note:	“surrender my body that I may boast”

But in the 2011 NIV, the verse now looks like this (cf. NRSV, NLT):

NIV text 2011:	“give over my body to hardship that I may boast
NIV note:	“give over my body to the flames”

In Greek the difference is only one letter:

kauthēsōmai/kauchēsōmai. The word “boast” has the best and earliest Greek support; the word “flames” appeared first in Latin translation (at a time when Christians were being burned at the stake). In this case *both* readings have some inherent difficulties: “Flames” represents a form that is ungrammatical in Greek; moreover, Paul’s letter was written well before Christians were martyred by burning — and no one ever voluntarily “gave over their bodies” to be burned at the stake! On the other hand, while supported by what is easily the best evidence, it has been difficult to find an adequate meaning for “that I may boast.” Here is one of those places where a good commentary will probably be necessary in order for you to make up your own mind.

The preceding example is a good place for us also to refer you back to the last chapter. You will note that the choice of the correct text is one of the *content* questions. A good exegete must know, if it is possible to know, which of these words Paul actually wrote. On the other hand, it should also be noted that Paul’s final *point* here is little affected by that choice. In either case, he means that if one gives the body over to some extreme sacrifice, or the like, but lacks love, it is all for nothing.

This, then, is what it means to say that translators must make textual choices, and it also explains one of the reasons why translations will sometimes differ — and also why translators are themselves interpreters. Before we go on to the second reason why translations differ, we need to make a note here about the King James Version and its most recent revision, the New King James Version.

The KJV for a long time was the most widely used translation in the world; it also served for several centuries as the classic expression of the English language. Indeed, its

translators coined phrases that will be forever embedded in our language (“coals of fire,” “the skin of my teeth,” “tongues of fire”). However, for the New Testament, the only Greek text available to the translators of the 1611 edition was based on late manuscripts, which had accumulated the mistakes of over a thousand years of copying. Few of these mistakes — and we must note that there are many of them — make any difference to us doctrinally, but they often do make a difference in the meaning of certain specific texts. Recognizing that the English of the KJV was no longer a living language — and thoroughly dissatisfied with its modern revision (RSV/NRSV) — it was decided by some to “update” the KJV by ridding it of its “archaic” way of speaking. But in so doing, the NKJV revisers eliminated the best feature of the KJV (its marvelous expression of the English language) and kept the worst (its flawed Greek text).

This is why for study *you should use almost any modern translation other than the KJV or the NKJV*. But how to choose between modern translations takes us to the next kinds of choices translators have to make.

The Questions of Language

The next two kinds of choices — verbal and grammatical — bring us to the actual science of translation. The difficulty has to do with the transferring of words and ideas from one language to another. To understand what various theories underlie our modern translations, you will need to become acquainted with the following technical terms:

Original language: the language that one is translating *from*; in our case, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. For convenience, we will usually say just “Hebrew or Greek.”

Receptor language: the language that one is translating into; in our case, English.

Historical distance: has to do with the differences that exist between the original language and the receptor language, both in matters of words, grammar, and idioms as well as in matters of culture and history.

Formal equivalence: the attempt to keep as close to the “form” of the Hebrew or Greek, both words and grammar, as can be conveniently put into understandable English. The closer one stays to the Hebrew or Greek idiom, the closer one moves toward a theory of translation often described as “literal.” Translations based on formal equivalence will keep historical distance intact at all points. The problem here, however, is that “understandable” English is not the goal of good translation; rather the goal is good “contemporary” English that is comparable in language and meaning to the original author’s intent — as much as that can be determined from the context.

Functional equivalence: the attempt to keep the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek but to put their words and idioms into what would be the normal way of saying the same thing in English. The more one is willing to forego formal equivalence for functional equivalence, the closer one moves toward a theory of translation frequently described as “dynamic equivalent.” Such translations sustain historical distance on all historical and factual matters but “update” matters of language, grammar, and style.

Free translation: the attempt to translate the *ideas* from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original. A free translation, sometimes also

called a paraphrase, tries to eliminate as much of the historical distance as possible and still be faithful to the intent of the original text. The danger here is that a free translation can easily become *too* free—reflecting how the translator wishes the concepts would have been conveyed, rather than reflecting faithfully how they actually are conveyed in the original text.

Theory of translation has basically to do with whether one puts primary emphasis on formal or on functional equivalency, that is, the degree to which one is willing to go in order to bridge the gap between the two languages, either in use of words and grammar or in bridging the historical distance by offering a modern equivalent. For example, should “lamp” be translated “flashlight” or “torch” in cultures where these serve the purpose a lamp once did? Or should one translate it “lamp,” and let readers bridge the gap for themselves? Should “holy kiss” be translated “the handshake of Christian love” in cultures where public kissing is offensive? Should “coals of fire” become “burning embers/coals,” since this is more normal English? Should “endurance inspired by hope” (1 Thess 1:3), a formal equivalent that is almost meaningless in English, be rendered “your endurance inspired by hope,” which is what Paul’s Greek actually means?

Translators are not always consistent, but one of these theories will govern all translators’ basic approach to their task. At times the free or literal translations can be excessive, so much so that Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Version “translated” Paul’s letter to Rome as to Washington (!), while Robert Young, in a literal rendering published in 1862, transformed one Pauline sentence into this impossible English (?): “Whoredom is actually heard of among you, and such whoredom as is not even named among the nations — as that

should be in favor of the receptor language — without losing the meaning of the original language, of course — since the very reason for translation is to make these ancient texts accessible to the English-speaking person who does not know the original languages.

But note well: If the best translational theory is functional equivalence, a translation that adheres to formal equivalence is often helpful as a *second* source; it can give the reader some confidence as to what the Hebrew or Greek actually looked like. A free translation also can be helpful — to stimulate thinking about the possible meaning of a text. But the basic translation for reading and studying should be something in the NIV/NRSV range.

The problem with a formal-equivalent translation is that it keeps distance at the wrong places — in language and grammar. Thus the translator often renders the Greek or Hebrew into English that currently is never written or spoken that way. It is like translating *maison blanche* from French to English as “house white.” For example, no native English-speaking person, even in the sixteenth century, would *ever* have said “coals of fire” (Rom 12:20 KJV). That is a literal rendering of the Greek construction, but what it *means* in English is “burning coals” (NIV) or “live coals” (REB).

A second problem with a literal translation is that it often makes the English ambiguous, where the Greek or Hebrew was quite clear to the original recipients. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:16 the Greek phrase *kata sarka* can be translated literally “[to know] according to the flesh” (as in the NASB). But this is not an ordinary way of speaking in English. Furthermore, the phrase is ambiguous. Is it the person who is *being known* who is “according to the flesh,” which seems to

be implied in the NASB, and which in this case would mean something like “by their outward appearance”? Or is the person who *is* “*knowing*” doing so “according to the flesh,” which would mean “from a worldly point of view”? In this case, however, the context is clear, which the NIV correctly renders: “So from now on [since we have been raised to a new life, v. 15] we regard no one from a worldly point of view.”

The problem with a free translation, on the other hand, especially for study purposes, is that the translator updates the original author too much. In the second half of the twentieth century, three “free translations” served succeeding generations of Christians: Phillips (by J. B. Phillips), the Living Bible (by Ken Taylor, who “translated” into language for the young not the Greek Bible but the KJV), and The Message (by Eugene Peterson). On the one hand, these renditions sometimes have especially fresh and vivid ways of expressing some old truths and have thus each served to stimulate contemporary Christians to take a new look at their Bibles. On the other hand, such a “translation” often comes very close to being a commentary, but without other options made available to the reader. Therefore, as stimulating as these can sometimes be, they are never intended to be one’s only Bible, as even these translators would be quick to admit. Thus the reader needs regularly to check these rather eye-catching moments against another translation or a commentary to make sure that not too much freedom has been taken.

SOME PROBLEM AREAS

The way various translations handle the problem of “historical distance” can best be noted by illustrating several of the kinds

of problems involved.

1. *Weights, measures, money.* This is a particularly difficult area. Does one transliterate the Hebrew and Greek terms (“ephah,” “homer,” etc.), or try to find their English equivalents? If one chooses to go with equivalents in weights and measures, does one use the standard “pounds” and “feet” still in vogue in the United States (but not Canada), or does one follow the rest of the English-speaking world and translate “liters” and “meters”? Inflation can make a mockery of monetary equivalents in a few years. The problem is further complicated by the fact that exaggerated measures or money are often used to suggest contrasts or startling results, as in Matthew 18:24 – 28 or Isaiah 5:10. To transliterate in these cases would likely cause an English reader to miss the point of the passages altogether.

The KJV, followed closely by the NKJV and NRSV, was inconsistent in these matters. For the most part they transliterated, so that we got “baths,” “ephahs,” “homers,” “shekels,” and “talents.” Yet the Hebrew *'ammāh* was translated “cubit,” the *zeret* a “span,” and the Greek *mina* (“mina”) became the British “pound,” while the *dénarion* became a mere “penny.” For most North Americans all of these have the effect of being meaningless or misleading.

The NASB uses “cubit” and “span” — both of which, according to modern dictionaries, represent “an ancient linear unit” — but otherwise consistently transliterates and then puts an English equivalent in the margin (except for John 2:6 [where the NASB had put the transliteration in the margin!]). This is the way the original NIV also chose to go (except for Genesis 6 – 7, where “cubits” were turned into feet), while the marginal notes are given both in English standards and in metric

equivalents. The apparent reason for this is that the “cubit” was just flexible enough in length so as to preclude precision in English — especially when translating the measurements of structures.

On the matter of monetary equivalents translations are sometimes puzzling, but in fairness the difficulties here are enormous. Take, for example, the first occurrence of *talantōn* and *dénarion* in the New Testament (Matt 18:23 – 34, the parable of the unmerciful servant). The *talantōn* was a Greek monetary unit of a varying, but very large, amount. Traditionally it was transliterated into English as “talent,” which you will immediately recognize as quite problematic, since that word has changed meaning over time in English to connote “ability.” The *dénarion*, on the other hand, was a Roman monetary unit of a modest amount, basically the daily wage of a day laborer. So what to do with these words? In the parable they are intentionally not precise amounts but are purposely hyperbolic contrasts (see ch. 8). The NIV, therefore, rightly translates “ten thousand talents” as “ten thousand bags of gold” and “a hundred denarii” as “a hundred silver coins,” and then explains the words in a footnote.

On the other hand, when a precise amount is in view or the coin itself is being spoken about, most contemporary formal- and functional-equivalent translations have moved toward transliterating “*denarius*” but are still ambivalent about the “*talent*.”

We would argue that either equivalents or transliterations with marginal notes are a good procedure with most weights and measurements. However, the use of equivalents is surely to be preferred in passages like Isaiah 5:10 and the Matthew parable noted above. Note, for example, how much more

meaningfully — though with some liberties as to precision — the GNB renders the purposeful contrasts in Isaiah 5:10 than does the NKJV (cf. NASB):

Isaiah 5:10

- NKJV: “For ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield one ephah.”
- GNB: “The grapevines growing on five acres of land will yield only five gallons of wine. Ten bushels of seed will produce only one bushel of grain.”

2. *Euphemisms*. Almost all languages have euphemisms for matters of sex and toilet. A translator has one of three choices in such matters: (1) translate literally but perhaps leave an English-speaking reader bewildered or guessing, (2) translate the *formal equivalent* but perhaps offend or shock the reader, or (3) translate with a *functionally equivalent euphemism*.

Option 3 is probably the best, if there is an appropriate euphemism. Otherwise it is better to go with option 2, especially for matters that generally no longer require euphemisms in English. Thus to have Rachel say, “I am having my monthly period” (Gen 31:35 GNB; cf. NIV) is to be preferred to the literal “the manner of women is upon me” (NASB, cf. KJV, RSV). For the same idiom earlier in Genesis (18:11) the GNB is consistent (“Sarah had stopped having her monthly periods”), while the NIV is much freer, having the public reading of Scripture in mind (“Sarah was past the age of childbearing”). Similarly, “[he] forced her, and lay with her” (2 Sam 13:14 KJV) becomes simply “he raped her” in the NIV and GNB.

There can be dangers in this, however, especially when translators themselves miss the meaning of the idiom, as can be

seen in the original NIV, GNB, and LB renderings of the first assertion addressed in 1 Corinthians 7:1 “It is good for a man not to marry,” which unfortunately is both wrong and misleading. The idiom “to touch a woman” in every other case in antiquity means to have sexual intercourse with a woman, and never means anything close to “to marry.” Here the NAB has found an equivalent euphemism: “A man is better off having no relations with a woman”; but this has the possibility of being misunderstood or misconstrued to mean no relations whatsoever — including friendly ones. So the NIV has eliminated the euphemism altogether: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman,” which it also correctly puts in quotes as something being put forward in Corinth, to which Paul will eventually answer with both a “yes” and “no,” qualified by the circumstances.

3. *Vocabulary.* When most people think of translation, this is the area they usually have in mind. It seems like such a simple task: find the English word that means the same as the Hebrew or Greek word. But finding precisely the right word is what makes translation so difficult. Part of the difficulty is not only in the choosing of an appropriate English word but also in the choosing of a word that will not already be filled with connotations that are foreign to the original language.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that some Hebrew or Greek words have ranges of meaning different from anything available in English. In addition, some words can have several shades of meaning, as well as two or more considerably different meanings. And a deliberate play on words borders on being nearly impossible to translate from one language to another.

We have already noted how various translations have

chosen to interpret “virgin” in 1 Corinthians 7:36. In chapter 1 we also noted the difficulty in rendering Paul’s use of the word *sarx* (“flesh”). In most cases, almost anything is better than the literal “flesh.” The NIV handles this word especially well: “sinful nature” when Paul is contrasting “flesh” and “spirit”; “human nature” in Romans 1:3 where it refers to Jesus’ Davidic descent; “from a worldly point of view” in 2 Corinthians 5:16 noted above (cf. 1 Cor 1:26 “by human standards”); and “body” when it means that, as in Colossians 1:22.

This kind of example can be illustrated many times over and is one of the reasons why a translation by functional equivalence is much to be preferred to a more literal one, since the latter has the frequent possibility of misleading the English-speaking reader, and thus misses the reason for translation.

4. *Wordplays*. Wordplays tend to abound in most languages, but they are always unique to the original language and can seldom, if ever, be translated into a receptor language. The same is true with wordplays in the Bible, which abound in the poetry of the Old Testament and can be found throughout the New Testament as well. So what does the translator do?

Take, for example, the play on the sounds for the words “summer” and “end” in Amos 8:1 – 2, where even though the Hebrew consonants are *qyš* and *qš* respectively, the two words themselves were pronounced virtually alike in Amos’s day. Translations that tend toward formal equivalence translate in a straightforward manner:

NRSV: “[God] said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A basket of summer [*qyš*] fruit.’ Then the LORD said to me, ‘The end [*qš*] has come upon my people Israel.’”

Translations that move toward functional equivalence try to work with the wordplay, even when doing so may alter the meaning somewhat:

NIV: “ ‘What do you see, Amos,’ [God] asked. ‘A basket of ripe [qy:ʃ] fruit,’ I answered. Then the LORD said to me, ‘The time is ripe [q:ʃ] for my people Israel.’ ”

An example of the same difficulty can be found in some instances of Paul’s use of the word “flesh,” noted above and in the previous chapter (p. 23). This happens especially in Galatians 3:3, where Paul says (NASB): “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Lying behind this rhetoric is the issue of Gentile believers yielding to Jewish-Christian pressure to submit to circumcision (of the literal flesh!). But it is clear from the full argument of Galatians that Paul here means more than just circumcision when referring to “by the flesh.” In Galatians 5 the “flesh” has to do with living in a self-centered, ungodly way as opposed to living “by the Spirit.” So what does the functional-equivalent translator do in 3:3? The 1984 NIV renders it “by human effort” (cf. NLT) and the GNB “by your own power”; but in doing so they must lose the “Spirit/flesh” contrast that is picked up again later (4:28 and 5:13 – 26). Both ways of translating are “right,” of course, in keeping with the respective theories of translation; but in both cases something is lost, simply because these particular wordplays are not available in English. And this is yet another reason why you should frequently use more than one translation, especially when “reading” borders on “studying.”

5. *Grammar and Syntax*. Even though most Indo-European languages have a great many similarities, each language has its

own preferred structures as to how words and ideas are related to each other in sentences. It is at these points especially where translation by functional equivalence is to be preferred. A formal-equivalent translation tends to abuse or override the ordinary structures of the receptor language by directly transferring into it the syntax and grammar of the original language. Such direct transfers are often *possible* in the receptor language, but they are seldom *preferable*. From hundreds of examples, we choose two as illustrations, one from Greek and one from Hebrew.

a. One of the characteristics of Greek is its fondness for what are known as genitive constructions. The genitive is the ordinary case of possession, as in “my book.” Such a true possessive can also, but only very awkwardly, be rendered “the book of me.” However, other possessives in English, such as “God’s grace,” do not so much mean, for example, that God owns the grace as that he gives it, or that it comes from him. Such “non-true” possessives can always be translated into English as “the grace *of* God.”

The Greek language has a great profusion of these latter kinds of genitives, which are used, for example, as descriptive adjectives to express source or to connote special relationships between two nouns. A “literal” translation almost invariably transfers these into English with an “*of*” phrase, but frequently with strange results, such as the “coals of fire” noted above, or “the word of His power” (Heb 1:3 NKJV). Both of these are clearly adjectival or descriptive genitives, which in the NIV are more accurately rendered “burning coals” and “his powerful word.” Similarly the NASB’s “steadfastness of hope” (1 Thess 1:3) and “joy of the Holy Spirit” (1:6) are translated in the NIV as “endurance inspired by hope” and “joy given by the Holy

Spirit.” These are not only to be preferred; they are, in fact, more accurate because they give a genuine English equivalent rather than a literal, Greek way of expressing things that in English would be nearly meaningless.

Interestingly enough, in one of the few places where the KJV (followed by the RSV but not the NASB) offered something of an equivalent (1 Cor 3:9), the translators missed the meaning of the genitive altogether. Apparently they were led astray by the word “fellow-workers” and thus translated, “For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building.” But in Paul’s sentence each occurrence of “God” is clearly a *possessive* genitive, with an emphasis on both *we* (Paul and Apollos) and *you* (the church as God’s field and building) as belonging to him. This is correctly translated in the 2011 NIV as, “For we are God’s coworkers; you are God’s field, God’s building.” Paul’s point is made even more clearly in the NAB, where they have rendered “field” as “cultivation.”

But the still greater problem exists with the first of these Greek sentences, which is regularly rendered “God’s coworkers.” In almost anyone’s understanding of English this would mean coworkers *with* God, as it has in fact been so often understood. But Paul’s genitive is almost certainly intended as a “possessive,” meaning “coworkers in God’s service” as the 2011 NIV renders it, not working “alongside God,” as the standard rendering seems to imply and is thus frequently misunderstood and misused

b. Thousands of times in the Old Testament the KJV translators woodenly followed the Hebrew word order in a way that does not produce normal idiomatic English. One common example is how often verses (with each verse a paragraph!)

begin with the word “and.” For example, in Genesis 1 every verse, without exception, begins with “and” — a total of thirty times. Even the NKJV translators had difficulty with this idiom; nonetheless they still rendered the Hebrew “and” in almost every case (using “and,” “then,” “so,” etc.). Now compare the NIV. It reduces the number of occurrences of “and” to fifteen, while at the same time improving the flow of the language so that it sounds more natural to the ear.

The NIV translators produced an improved English version by taking seriously the fact that the vast majority of prose sentences in Old Testament Hebrew begin with one of the two Hebrew forms for the word “and.” The word for “and” appears even when there is absolutely nothing preceding it to which the sentence logically connects. In fact, six books of the Old Testament (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, Ezra, Ruth, and Esther) begin in Hebrew with the word “and,” though these obviously do not follow any previous statement. Accordingly, it is now recognized by Hebrew grammarians that “and” at the beginning of a sentence is virtually the equivalent of the use of capitalization at the beginning of English sentences. This does not mean that the Hebrew “and” should *never* be translated by the English “and”; it simply means that “and” is only *sometimes*, and certainly not a majority of the time, the best rendering in English. A simple English sentence beginning with a capital letter will do nicely in most cases.

Another example is the KJV’s repeated “and it came to pass,” which is frequently retained in the NKJV, even though this is never used in normal English anymore. Indeed, it was rare even in the seventeenth century when the KJV was undertaken. Because the Hebrew narrative verb form that lies behind it was followed literally and woodenly, the resulting

translation, “and it came to pass,” occupied a prominent position in Old Testament style but nowhere else in English speech. We once heard a sermon on the concept that all things are temporary and shall eventually pass away (cf. 1 Cor 13:8 – 10) based on the frequency of the clause “and it came to pass,” which the preacher misunderstood to mean, “And it came *in order to* pass away.” In fact, the NIV translators (rightly) do not give expression to the Hebrew clause as such. Judiciously rendering Hebrew into English requires an equivalent *meaning*, not an equivalent word or clause pattern.

6. *Matters of Gender*. When this book first appeared in 1981, the problem of using masculine language where women are included or are in view was just beginning to become an issue for translators. By the time the second edition appeared in 1993, one revision (NRSV) of a well-established translation (RSV) had already appeared, which became deliberately inclusive in all such instances in both the Old and New Testaments. In the following decade all the other leading translations have followed suit to a greater or lesser degree, while at least one revision (ESV) came into existence to “stem this tide,” as it were, so that in effect it is deliberately exclusive of women in many places where it is quite unnecessary to do so. Indeed, there can be no question that standard usage in both Great Britain and North America has now shifted strongly toward inclusiveness when both men and women are being addressed or are in view. Recent surveys show that a majority of people up to age seventy (!) will consider a statement like “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” to refer only to men or boys, not to women or girls.

But this also presents some agonizing decisions on the part of translators. There is very little difficulty, for example, in

translating Paul's vocative "brothers" as "brothers and sisters," since in almost all cases it is clear that women are also in view — and in any case some Christian traditions (Pentecostals, for example) have been using this inclusive vocative for several generations. But other cases are more problematic. Two examples will suffice.

In order to avoid excluding women from passages that are spoken to or about people in general, it has been deemed necessary by some to make certain clauses plural that are expressed in the singular (although this usually does not have significance in itself). Psalm 1:1 ("Blessed is the man" [RSV]) is an example, where many revisions of existing translations have moved to the plural in order to avoid unnecessarily excluding women from this psalm, since the generic use of "man" as a way of saying "person" has generally fallen out of current usage. To render this as "person" here would require the translator to follow up with either masculine pronouns (v. 2 "his delight") or with some kind of awkwardness ("his or her") that would distort the poetry.

Although there have been a variety of attempts to resolve this problem in contemporary English versions, the present NIV seems to have done so quite successfully, by recasting to "one" in verse 1, to "the person" in verse 3, and simply "the wicked" and "the righteous" for the concluding contrasts in verses 4 – 6. Here, functional equivalence rules, since the only item lost in the poem is the author's own move from speaking first in the singular and then the plural. What is lost in terms of actual meaning is usually relatively small in these sorts of cases. It should be noted that "pluralizing" is not usually particularly harmful, and the issue is more a matter of getting used to a shift in English grammar. In gnomic sayings that

begin with “If anyone” or “Whoever” or “When someone,” the standard English rule learned by the authors as schoolboys was that these must be followed by a singular pronoun, which of course was always masculine. But that was not everyone’s rule, since it turns out that several well-known authors of nineteenth-century English novels frequently used a “singular” *them, their, or they* in such sentences. Again, this is now becoming standard English, at least in the print and spoken media, so that one can regularly hear, “If anyone . . . , let them . . .” For one of the authors of this book the issue was settled a couple years back, when a TV advertisement used “anyone . . . , . . . they” in the sentence.

ON CHOOSING A TRANSLATION

We have been trying to help you choose a translation. We conclude with a few summary remarks about several translations.

First, it should be noted that we have not tried to be exhaustive. There are still other translations of the whole Bible that we have not included in our discussion, not to mention over eighty others of the New Testament alone that have appeared since the beginning of the twentieth century. Several of the latter were excellent (e.g., Weymouth, 1903; Helen Montgomery, 1924; Williams, 1937) but now tend to be quite outdated in their use of English.

Among the whole-Bible translations not discussed are some that are theologically biased, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ New World Translation (1961). This is an extremely literal translation into which have been worked the heretical doctrines of this cult. Others of these translations are eccentric,

such as that by George Lamsa (1940), who believed that a Syriac translation from around AD 400 held the keys to everything. One should probably also include here The Amplified Bible, which had a run of popularity far beyond its worth. It is far better to use several translations, note where they differ, and then check out these differences in another source than to be led to believe that a word can mean one of several things in any given sentence, with the reader left to choose whatever best strikes his or her fancy.

Which translation, then, should one read? We would venture to suggest that the current NIV (2011), a committee translation by the best scholarship in the evangelical tradition is as good a translation as you can get. The GNB, HCSB and NAB are also especially good. One would do well to have some or all of these. The NAB is a committee translation by the best scholarship in the American Catholic tradition. The HCSB is a committee translation by evangelical scholars holding to the inerrancy of Scripture. The GNB is an outstanding translation by a single scholar, Robert G. Bratcher, who regularly consulted with others and whose expertise in linguistics has brought the concept of dynamic equivalence to translation in a thoroughgoing way.

Along with one or more of these, readers would also do well to use one or more of the following: the NASB or the NRSV. Both translations are attempts to update the KJV. The translators used superior original texts and thereby eliminated most of what in the KJV did not exist in the original languages. At the same time they tried to adhere as closely as possible to the *language* of the KJV, with some modernization. The NRSV is by far the better translation; the NASB is much more like the KJV and therefore far more literal — to the point of being

wooden.

Along with one or more of these, we recommend you also consult either the REB or NJB — or both. Both of these are committee translations. The REB is the product of the best of British scholarship and therefore includes many British idioms not always familiar to North American readers. The NJB is an English translation from the French *Bible de Jerusalem*. Both of these translations tend to be freer at times than the others described here as functionally equivalent. But both of them also have some outstanding features and are well worth using in conjunction with the others.

In the following chapters we will follow the NIV 2011 unless otherwise noted. If you were regularly to read this translation, and then consult at least one from three other categories (NRSV/NASB; GNB/NAB; REB/NJB), you would be giving yourself the best possible start to an intelligent reading and study of the Bible.