The Complete Guide to
BIBLE
TRANSLATIONS

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THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO BIBLE TRANSLATIONS
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Why Choosing the Right Bible Translation Is Important

A Christian who walks into a typical Christian bookstore these days will generally find no less than ten different English translations of the Bible on the bookshelves—sometimes 15 or more. Choosing between them is not an easy task. The moment one encounters all these translations, numerous questions flood the mind: Which translation is the best? Which one is the easiest to understand? Which is the most accurate? Why are they all different? Are newer translations better than older ones? How do I know I can trust the translators? Are some of these translations for specific denominations, or are they for all Christians? Are Bibles with the words of Christ in red better than Bibles that do not have this feature?[1]

Let's be honest: A person who walks into a Christian bookstore today can be virtually overwhelmed at the number of available choices for buying a Bible. And most Bible buyers haven't the foggiest idea about how to answer the questions above. For this reason, the book you

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are holding in your hands has been custom designed to provide you—the reader—with all the information necessary to make an *informed* decision about which Bible translation might be best *for you.*

First, though, let us consider a brief survey of major Bible translations throughout church history. This will set the context for all that follows.

Historical Insights on Translations

Bible translations are not a new thing. They have been around for many centuries. For example, way back in the third century B.C., the Jews produced a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament for the Jews living in Alexandria, a Greek-speaking city. This translation was called the Septuagint—a term that means "seventy," referring to the roughly seventy translators who produced the translation.[2] The Septuagint was used for reading aloud in synagogues in Greek-speaking cities, including Corinth and many cities in Rome. This translation solved a big problem, for many of the Jews who grew up in these cities could no longer speak Hebrew, but only Greek.

Later, Christians began producing translations of the Old and New Testaments in different languages so they could fulfill their assignment by Jesus to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Early in biblical history, Syriac or Aramaic translations of the Bible became increasingly important as Christianity spread throughout Central Asia, India, and China. As Christianity continued to spread even further, the need developed for Egyptian (Coptic), Ethiopic, Gothic (Germanic), Armenian, and Arabic translations.

Because Latin emerged as the common language in many parts of the Roman Empire, a man by the name of Jerome was commissioned by the Bishop of Rome to translate the Scriptures into Latin in A.D. 382. This translation continued to be an unofficial standard text of the Bible throughout the Middle Ages.

A problem soon emerged, however. Prior to the 1500s, during which the Roman Catholic Church dominated, translations were

generally unavailable in the languages *of most of the people.* (The exception would be the translations mentioned above that are limited to certain parts of the world.) Predominantly, church services and the Bible itself were in Latin, and this remained the case for many centuries. Church authorities feared that if everyone had a translation in their own language, they would come up with all kinds of strange and different interpretations. Such would be intolerable, many reasoned, for the Roman Catholic Church would then lose control of what the people believed.

Other brave souls, however, believed that the common people needed to have the life-changing truths of God's Word in their own language, and hence produced translations, even in the face of great threat from Roman Catholic authorities. Because of the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, it was just a matter of time before Bible translations were being produced *en masse* for the common people, and Catholic authorities could do nothing to prevent it.

John Wycliffe (born mid-1320s), a lecturer at Oxford University, is an example of one who sought to provide a translation of the Bible for English-speaking Christians. He desired the average English-speaking layman to have access to the Word of God rather than the Roman Catholic Church having sole access. He completed his English translation in A.D. 1382.[3] Wycliffe wrote:

> Those heretics who pretend that the laity need not know God's law but that the knowledge which priests have had imparted to them by word of mouth is sufficient, do not deserve to be listened to. For Holy Scriptures is the faith of the Church, and the more widely its true meaning becomes known the better it will be. Therefore since the laity should know the faith, it should be taught in whatever language is most easily comprehended…[After all,] Christ and His apostles taught the people in the language best known to them.[4]

Unfortunately, Wycliffe's translation was based not on the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts of the Bible,* but rather on Jerome's Latin translation of the original manuscripts, called the Vulgate. This means that as helpful as Wycliffe's translation was, it had some shortcomings. Scholar Daniel Wallace tells us that "Latin does not have the definite article. That is a gift that the Greeks gave to Europe. But the article occurs in the Greek NT almost 20,000 times—understanding its use is vital for hundreds of passages. And yet, Wycliffe knew none of this, since he only used the Latin text as his base."[5]

Wycliffe's work—general writings, sermons, and translation of the Bible—did not go unchallenged. Indeed, some twenty-four theses from his writings and sermons were condemned as heretical or erroneous by a synod held at Blackfriars, London in A.D. 1382. He was fired from his teaching position at Oxford that same year. Throughout the rest of his life, five edicts were issued for his arrest by the pope in Rome. Lucky for him, England had distanced itself from Rome somewhat, and he found a level of protection in powerful English nobles. Two years later, in 1384, he died of natural causes and was buried in the Lutterworth church cemetery, where he had been pastor. Tragically and unfairly, Wycliffe was ultimately denounced as a heretic, and in 1415 his Bible was condemned and burned. As if that were not enough, his body was exhumed from the grave over a decade later and burned, with his ashes being thrown into a river. However, as scholar Bruce Metzger notes, "just as his ashes were carried by that river to multiple points, so his message went far and wide during the following centuries."[6] Judging by the number of manuscripts that have survived, Wycliffe's translation was clearly widely circulated *and* widely read.

Sometime later, William Tyndale (1492–1536), who taught at Cambridge University, translated the New Testament based on the

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* The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, along with some Aramaic, and the New Testament was originally written in Greek.

original Greek manuscripts. Tyndale had been trained in both Greek and Hebrew, earning a bachelor's degree from Oxford in 1512 and his master's degree in 1515. He later completed his studies at Cambridge. It was not long before he became fluent in some seven languages. Scholars are practically unanimous that Tyndale's contribution to the English Bible is unparalleled. As one scholar put it, "No one has made more impact on the translation of the Bible into English than William Tyndale."[7]

Tyndale found a model to imitate in the person of German Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546). Luther had translated the New Testament into German—not the High German used in courtly circles but the vernacular German used by the common folk. Luther explained his philosophy this way: "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."[8] Tyndale wanted to do the same for English readers.

History reveals that Tyndale was highly motivated: "I had perceived by experience how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except that the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text." Tyndale once told a Catholic antagonist: "I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life, before many years I will make sure that a boy who drives the plough knows more of the Scriptures than you do."[9]

In 1523 Tyndale sought to begin his work of translation in England. But after receiving a cold shoulder—indeed, a vigorous rebuff—from the bishop of London, he decided to permanently relocate to Hamburg. His translation of the New Testament was finally published in English in 1526 and was revised in 1534, 1535, and 1536. He made

progress in translating portions of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew, but he died before he was able to complete it.

Once Tyndale's New Testament was published, it was publicly burned in England. Tyndale was arrested in 1535, imprisoned in a fortress just north of Brussels, and the following year was tried and found guilty of heresy. Some of his critics falsely claimed that he changed the Bible as he translated it. He was strangled and burned at the stake. His crime? Translating a "corrupt" version of the Scriptures.[10] The final words he uttered were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." Tyndale's martyrdom reminds us that many have paid the ultimate price to make God's Word available to everyone. Tyndale's work was not in vain, however. Modern biblical scholars tell us that about 90 percent of the New Testament of the King James Version was ultimately based on Tyndale's work. (For more on this, see chapter 4.)

Myles Coverdale (1488–1569), who had been Tyndale's assistant as well as an English clergyman, produced the first complete printed English Bible. This was a milestone in Bible translation history. Coverdale's New Testament was essentially a slight revision of Tyndale's translation, with minor changes introduced after comparing it to Luther's New Testament. Portions of Tyndale's translation of the Old Testament were also influential in Coverdale's Bible. The Bible was published in 1535, and as it contained a dedication to the king and queen in flattering phraseology, it met with no serious opposition. The second edition of Coverdale's Bible was published "with the king's most gracious license."[11]

Another Bible worthy of note is the Matthew's Bible, published in 1537. This translation is apparently the work of one John Rogers, a Cambridge graduate and friend of William Tyndale who (probably wisely) published the Bible using a pseudonym, Thomas Matthew. This Bible closely follows the Tyndale version. In fact, the Matthew's Bible incorporates more of Tyndale's work than does the Coverdale Bible.

Just a few years later, the Great Bible was published in 1539. It was

deemed "great" because the Bible was so big, with pages measuring fifteen by ten inches, making it the biggest Bible yet to be published. The task of editing the Great Bible was entrusted to Coverdale at the behest of Thomas Cromwell. This was the first "authorized" English Bible to be published for the Church of England, and in the 1540 and subsequent editions, the title page boasted: "This is the Byble apoynted to the use of the churches." The Bible was produced mainly by revising the text of the earlier Matthew's Bible. Six further editions were published between 1540 and 1541. This Bible was exceedingly popular.

Not many years passed before the Geneva Bible was published, translated wholly from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. This Bible would ultimately become "the Bible of the people." It became the official Bible of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), and it was used by such luminaries as Shakespeare (its language and cadences can be found throughout his plays and sonnets), John Bunyan, the Mayflower Compact, and Oliver Cromwell. Even though the names of the translators do not appear in the Geneva New Testament (1557), the work is primarily credited to William Whittingham, brother-in-law of French Reformer John Calvin. Whittingham was an able scholar and succeeded John Knox as minister to the English congregation at Geneva. The Old Testament was translated by a group of linguists, including Anthony Gilby, Thomas Sampson, and others of uncertain identity.

The Geneva Bible went through an astounding 140 editions and remained in demand for almost 100 years. It is noteworthy that instead of using heavy, black-letter (Gothic) type, as had been used in previous Bibles, Roman type was used for the first time in the Geneva Bible. Moreover, this was the first English Bible with verse divisions (with verse numbers), and because of this was able to offer cross-references. It was also the first Bible to use italics extensively for words that were not in the original text. The Bible was published with notes in the margins that explained difficult points in the text, such as historical

and geographical references. Other notes were doctrinal in nature. Not unexpectedly, the notes were Calvinistic in tone, and some had an anti-papal bias. The Bible also contained maps, tables, chapter summaries, and running titles. Because of such features, as well as a relatively low cost, this became a very popular Bible in a short time. Amusingly, this Bible is also called the Breeches Bible because of its translation of Genesis 3:7, speaking of Adam and Eve: "They sewed fig tree leaves together and made themselves breeches."[12]

A very short time after the Geneva Bible was published, the Bishops' Bible was published in 1568. The popularity of the Geneva Bible irked some English church officials, and hence, in 1564, the archbishop of Canterbury initiated efforts to produce a translation of the Bible that would replace the Geneva and other Bibles. The Bishops' Bible was, in fact, the official Anglican response to the Geneva Bible. It was called the Bishops' Bible because it was a group of Anglican bishops along with some soon-to-become Anglican bishops that revised it. They used the Great Bible as the basis of their work, making changes only as required by the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. Production took four years, from 1564 to 1568.

Modern scholars have noted that the Bishops' Bible has an uneven quality, perhaps because of the exercise of individual freedom by the translators without adequate hands-on editorial supervision of the project. Some translators apparently followed the Great Bible quite closely, while others apparently departed from it quite freely. The translation of the New Testament is clearly superior in quality to the Old Testament. Nevertheless, despite such defects, this became the second "authorized" English version of the Bible, eventually displacing the Great Bible as the one "appoynted to be read in the Churches." However, as scholars Gordon Fee and Mark Strauss have noted, "it was seldom used outside the Anglican communion because of the superior quality of the Geneva Bible."[13]

A few decades later brought publication of a Roman Catholic translation, the Douay-Rheims Bible. This Bible represents an effort on the

part of the Roman Catholic Church to replace the Geneva and other Bibles that were unacceptable to their Roman point of view. It was produced by Gregory Martin, a Roman Catholic scholar. It essentially became the "KJV" of the English-speaking Roman Catholic Church up through the mid-twentieth century. It was completed in 1582 at Rheims in France. The translation was made not from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts but rather from the Latin Vulgate. Modern scholars observe that this translation is often too literal to be suitable for use in public worship, and also tends to use too many technical words.

Not long after this, the previously mentioned Geneva Bible was dethroned by the King James Version (1611). However, the Geneva Bible had a substantial influence on the King James Version. As one scholar put it:

> The influence of [the Geneva Bible] on the KJV was enormous. The KJV translators employed this as much as Tyndale's (of course, much of Tyndale was incorporated into the Geneva). And although King James despised the Geneva Bible, in the original preface to the KJV the Bible is quoted several times—and every time it is the Geneva version that is quoted, not the King James! This was an implicit and perhaps unwitting admission of the Geneva Bible's superiority.[14]

Of course, there is a lot more to say about the KJV. I will withhold further comment until chapter 4, the whole of which deals with this monumental translation.

If there is one thing we learn from this brief survey, it is that minor and sometimes major dissatisfactions with previous translations bring about the need for new translations. However, as we will see below, sometimes it is updated research that can cause the need for new and modern translations.

Updated Research and Updated Translations

There are three areas of research that have brought about the need for new and modern translations. First, more ancient manuscripts have been discovered that are more reliable than those used for the King James Version. The more accurate the manuscripts, the more accurate the translations!

Second, since the late 1800s there have been many archaeological discoveries that have cast doubt on some of the renderings found in the King James Version. Historical evidence is now conclusive that the Greek of the New Testament was the common language of that day. It was most certainly not a dialect that only the intellectual elite of the time could understand. This has led some scholars today to suggest that we should translate the Bible in the common language of *our* day. As one scholar put it, "If the apostles wrote in easy-to-understand terms, then translations of the Bible should reflect this. We ought not to translate with big 50-cent religious-sounding words if the original was not written that way."[15]

And third, in recent decades there have been changes regarding the philosophy of translation, with some holding to the *formal equivalence* theory and others holding to the *dynamic equivalence* theory. I will address these theories at length in chapters 1 and 2.

First, however, allow me to share a brief procedural note. You may notice that some chapters provide more background details on the translation they address than other chapters. This is only because some publishers provide more details than others. For every chapter, however, I provide all the important and relevant information that is available. In each case, I think you will have plenty of information to make an informed decision about a translation.

1

The Difficulty of
Bible Translation

THE WORD *TRANSLATION* REFERS TO "the rendering of something into another language or into one's own from another language."[1] A Bible translation is "a rendering of the Bible in a language different than the one in which it was written."[2] More specifically, a Bible translation for native English-speakers takes the original Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek texts and puts them into the English language. An *accurate* translation is one that communicates to today's readers the same meaning that the original author's text conveyed to his original readers. Most Bible scholars say Bible translations should aim to remain faithful to the original meaning of the text while at the same time use language that sounds as clear and natural to the modern reader as the Hebrew or Greek did to the original readers. They ought to sound *natural,* as though they had originally been written in English, but at the same time preserve a feel for the original cultural setting.

Translation: Not an Easy Task

One might initially think Bible translation is an easy task—as easy as lining up all the Hebrew or Greek words on one side of the page and then quickly placing similar-meaning English words on the other side of the page, and *voila,* an English translation emerges. The reality is that Bible translation *is not* an easy task. Professor Daniel Wallace explains that "most laymen today think that a faithful translation of the Bible means a word-for-word translation. If the original has a noun, they expect a noun in the translation. If the original has sixteen words, they don't want to see seventeen words in the translation."[3] Such a view involves incredible ignorance, Wallace says. Translation involves substantially more than merely substituting words from one language to another. Bible translation ultimately involves *interpretation* of the Bible's meaning into another language, and, frankly, translators differ with each other as to the best way to render the ancient biblical texts into English.[4]

Translations by Individuals versus Committees

Some translations have been produced by a single individual. An example is *The New Testament in Modern English,* by J.B. Phillips. Such translations often have more vibrancy of style than translations done by a committee. The problem is that there is always the possibility that—whether consciously or unconsciously—the translator might allow too many of his interpretive views to bias or at least influence his translation.*

Most believe there is great benefit in a translation being done as a team effort. Not only is there a greater breadth of knowledge in a team of translators, a team can also serve to guard against personal biases, theological or otherwise, that might exist in an individual translator. The benefit of a large number of scholars working on a translation is

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* An excellent discussion regarding the possibility of theological bias in Bible translations may be found in Robert Thomas, *How to Choose a Bible Version* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), chapter 4.

that each can cross-check the work of the others. Not only does this *increase* accountability, but it can *decrease* the likelihood of idiosyncratic renderings. However, as David Dewey observes, problems *can* emerge with translations done by committees:

> Committee translations can suffer from any of three problems. First, they are made by biblical exegetes rather than English-language specialists. Consultation with English stylists generally comes late in the process. Second, a committee structure has a leveling-out effect: the need for compromise between committee members tends toward a conservative approach and sometimes to a blandness of style. And third, in the case of revised versions, changes may be only cautiously accepted. Typically, revisions are accepted only if agreed on by a two-thirds majority of the translation committee.[5]

Be that as it may, most Bible translations on the market today were accomplished by a committee of top-notch Hebrew and Greek scholars who worked for years—even over a decade—to complete their task. In some cases these committees were composed of people from a single Christian denomination, or at least predominantly from one denomination. For example, the Jerusalem Bible, the New Jerusalem Bible, and the New American Bible were translated by committees that were predominantly Roman Catholic. In other cases, the committee involved scholars from a variety of denominations, as was the case with the New International Version, the New American Standard Bible, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, and the NET Bible, among others. Some committees—such as those who translated the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, and the English Standard Version—were required to subscribe to the doctrine of biblical inspiration.

Even with a committee of top biblical experts, however, Bible

translation is still a very difficult task. The reasons for this will become clear in what follows.

No One-to-One Parallel in Words

One reason Bible translation is a difficult task is that, in many cases, there is no direct one-to-one parallel between words in the original Hebrew or Greek languages and the English language. For example, while the English language has a singular word, *love,* the Greek language has a number of words for "love," each of which communicates a different aspect of love (such as *friend* love or *passionate* love). For this reason, Bible translators must use their interpretive skills, remaining constantly sensitive to which nuance of meaning is being communicated by the original Hebrew or Greek word in a particular context so that the proper English word can be chosen to render that meaning.

The Historical Barrier

Another reason Bible translation can be difficult is that there is a historical barrier between the original documents and the modern translator. We are separated from the original documents by thousands of years. In order for translators to best accomplish their task, therefore, it is necessary for them to be thoroughly conversant in both the grammar and culture of the language they are translating. The more they know about the history of the culture that produced the document, the easier it is to translate. As Alan Duthie put it, "We expect Bible translators to have an up-to-date knowledge of the original languages and cultures so as to understand the full meaning of the Bible message before translating."[6] Archeological discoveries alone have uncovered all kinds of useful information about people who lived in Bible times—including their money, marriage customs, burial rites, business practices, trade, agriculture, fishing, hunting, shepherding, religious practices, and more. Such information is of immense value to the Bible translator.

Idioms and Figures of Speech

Another translational problem is that many languages make use of idioms, or figures of speech, that mean something in the original language but not necessarily in the translated language. As one scholar put it, "The trouble with figures of speech such as metaphors and similes is that they are culturally dependent."[7] For example, in the English language we have quite a number of idioms. To communicate that something is easy, we say, "It's a piece of cake." To exhort someone to do a good job at something, we might say, "Break a leg." When we want someone to calm down, we might say, "Chill." When something goes wrong, we might say, "How did the wheels come off this thing?" If we are going on a trip, we might say, "Let's hit the road." Such idioms can be extremely confusing to non-English readers.

Scholars Gordon Fee and Mark Strauss show a sense of humor in providing us with a paragraph full of English idioms:

> My career had seen better days. I was skating on thin ice, scraping the bottom of the barrel, and ready to say uncle. The boss and I did not see eye to eye, and he told me to shape up or ship out. There was no silver bullet. It was a safe bet I was going to sink or swim. Nobody could save my bacon. My smart-aleck colleague was a stick-in-the-mud and a snake in the grass who would sell me down the river as soon as shake a stick at me. I could smell a rat, so I steered clear of him. I had one slim chance. It was a shot in the dark, but if I could keep a stiff upper lip, stick to my guns, and sail close to the wind, I would get a second chance. The saving grace was that at the last minute I got a second wind and was saved by the bell.[8]

A foreigner trying to translate an English document into his language might find it exceedingly difficult to translate such idioms into his language. The reason is that such phrases are likely *not* idioms in *his* language, and hence a strictly literal translation of the words would

be confusing to his readers. Likewise, an English-speaking person seeking to translate a document from the French might come across French idioms that are meaningful to French people but meaning*less* to English-speaking people.

I bring all this up because there are also hundreds of idioms that were used among the ancients in Bible times, and these are not easy to render into modern English. For example, the Greek idiom "take up souls" carries the idea "keep in suspense" (John 10:24). To "have lifespan" is a Greek idiom that means a person is of age (John 9:21). "Those having badly" is a Greek idiom that means "those who were sick" (Mark 1:32).[9] "Having in belly" is a Greek idiom meaning "pregnant" (Matthew 1:18). Speaking "with a heart and a heart" is a Jewish idiom meaning to speak "with a double heart" or "with deception" (Psalm 12:2).

Daniel Wallace is thus correct in his assessment that "anyone who has ever learned a second language knows that a word-for-word translation is impossible much or most of the time. Idioms in one language need to be paraphrased. Even the King James translators realized this. In a couple of places in the OT, the Hebrew text literally reads, 'God's nostrils enlarged.' But the King James has something like, 'God became angry'—which is what the expression means."[10] Once a translator recognizes an idiom or a figure of speech in the original language, he must consider whether his readers would grasp the meaning correctly if he were to translate it word-for-word. In most cases involving idioms in the Bible, English readers *would not* grasp the original meaning, and so the *meaning* of the idiom must be communicated rather than the original *words.* Another option is to use a modern English idiom that communicates the same message as the ancient Jewish idiom. Eugene Peterson does this in his paraphrase, The Message.

Euphemisms

A euphemism is a culturally appropriate way of saying something that might otherwise be considered offensive, unpleasant, or perhaps

too direct. For example, a person might say that "nature is calling" when he needs to urinate. A person might say "I need to visit the restroom" for the same purpose.

There are euphemisms in all cultures, including the Hebrew and Greek. For example, among the ancient Jews, to "cover your feet" refers to going to the bathroom. To "know" a woman is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The "way of women" is a reference to a woman's monthly period.

Bible translators handle such euphemisms in one of several ways. Some Bible translations, such as formal equivalence (word-for-word) translations, render euphemisms quite literally and leave it up to the reader to figure out what is meant. Other Bible translations, such as dynamic equivalence (meaning-driven) translations, leave out the euphemism but rather describe the action. Still other translations, including some dynamic equivalence translations, might use an alternate modern euphemism that is known in the receptor language (like English). For example, a translation might render the Jewish euphemism "to cover his feet" by using the English euphemism "to relieve himself."[11]

Technical Words

Different Bible translation committees have different policies on how to handle technical language in the Bible. Those who subscribe to the formal equivalence philosophy believe technical words such as *justification, sanctification,* and *propitiation* should be retained in the biblical text since they are rich in theological meaning. By contrast, those who subscribe to the dynamic equivalence philosophy typically believe such terms are incomprehensible to the average reader and hence believe easier substitutes should be used.

Weights, Measures, and Money

Weights, measures, and money are unique to the Jewish cultural context and hence are not easy to translate into English. Formal

equivalence translations may transliterate Jewish weights, measures, and money—that is, they spell out the Hebrew or Greek term in English letters (for example, monetary units would include *shekels, talents, denarii,* and *minas*). A footnote is typically included that provides the modern English equivalent of each respective term. Dynamic equivalence translations typically insert a modern equivalent, sometimes including a footnote that references the original Hebrew or Greek term. As well, many Bible versions provide tables that make all this more understandable to the English reader.

Acrostics

A common feature of Hebrew poetry involves the use of the alphabetic acrostic. This entails beginning each line with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (see, for example, Psalm 119). Obviously, while this makes great sense and is easy to grasp by the ancient Hebrew mind, it is almost impossible to translate such acrostic forms into modern English. Most Bibles today simply insert some kind of footnote that clarifies the presence of an acrostic.

Wordplays

Another difficulty involved in translating from the biblical languages into English relates to wordplays. There are cases in the Bible in which there is an obvious wordplay, but it is nearly completely masked in English translations. To illustrate, one scholar notes that "the account of Jacob and Esau's birth and their fight for the rights of the firstborn (Gen. 25:24-34) has several [wordplays]. *Jacob* means 'grasping'; *Esau* means 'hairy'; and Esau's alternative name, *Edom,* means 'red'—hence the red stew exchanged for his birthright."[12]

Considering the Readership

An important consideration in Bible translation involves the target readership of the translation. Will the readers be old or young, new Christians or mature Christians, people who speak English as their

first language or people for whom English is a second language? Will the reading be for devotions or for detailed study? Will the reading be done privately or in a public setting? The target readership will largely determine whether or not theological wording—words like *justification, sanctification,* and *redemption*—can be used in the translation. If not, then alternative words or expressions must be found. The benefit of including theological words is that they often communicate a wealth of doctrinal truth. The downside of using a substitution is that an entire descriptive phrase must often be inserted into the text (for example, *justification* becomes "be made right with God").

Generally, formal equivalence (literal) translations retain traditional Bible vocabulary, while dynamic equivalence (meaning-driven) translations seek alternatives in order to make the Bible more accessible to readers who are less familiar with the Scriptures or who have a lower reading ability.

All Translation Necessitates *Some* Interpretation

All translation involves *some* interpretation. After all, there is seldom a one-to-one correspondence between the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages and modern English. Before we can translate a single word from the Hebrew or Greek, we must interpret the meaning of that word in its proper context. One must realize that words get their nuanced meaning in dynamic relationship with other words. That is why context is so very important. Every phrase, clause, and idiom must be interpreted in its proper context before it can be translated accurately into the English language.[13]

It is not too much to say that translation without interpretation is an absolute impossibility. As one scholar put it, "At every turn the translator is faced with interpretative decisions in different manuscript readings, grammar, syntax, the specific semantic possibilities of a Hebrew or Greek word for a given context, English idiom, and the like."[14] Indeed, "a faithful translator is obliged to convey in clear and readable form, not only the meanings of individual words and phrases,

but something also of the structure, rhythm, and emotive elements of the original text."[15]

To illustrate, if a Japanese man wanted to say something that carries the meaning, "That person is smart," he might use words *ano hito wa atama ga ii desu,* which, if translated literally into English, mean, "As for that person, his head is good." However, in the United States, no one ever says, "As for that person, his head is good." That is not the way we talk! An English person translating from the Japanese must therefore engage in a certain level of interpretation regarding this phrase, properly rendering it, "That person is smart."

We must do the same thing when translating biblical manuscripts from the original Hebrew or Greek languages. To convert Greek or Hebrew words and phrases into readable English, the translator must decide to some degree what each term means in its original context.[16] He must understand what something meant *in one culture* and then translate it in a way meaningful to *today's culture.* "Between biblical culture and modern western culture there is little overlap of concepts or of words. So in many cases it is difficult to find the right word in English."[17]

We might say, then, that all translation involves at least a two-step process. First, the translators must interpret the meaning of the text in its original context, taking into consideration not just the words themselves, but the literary genre, the culture of the author, the life-situation of the author, and the assumptions (theological and otherwise) that the author brings to the text. Second, then and *only then* is the translator in a position to determine how this meaning can best be conveyed in the receptor language (like English).

Because a certain amount of interpretation comes into play in any translation of the Bible, because there is no one-to-one parallel of words between languages, and because no two languages ever express themselves in exactly the same way, *no translation will ever be absolutely perfect.* It is simply impossible to carry every nuance of the original Hebrew or Greek into clear English. So, as one scholar laments, "Translation always involves a degree of compromise.

Inevitably, something is lost, added or altered in the task of translating from one language to another."[18]

A good policy—one that I will suggest several times throughout this book—is to regularly use several Bible translations, ranging from formal equivalence (word-for-word) translations to dynamic equivalence (meaning-driven) translations. This policy can help shed a great deal of light on what the original biblical author was seeking to communicate.

Why the Need for New Bible Translations?

It seems that new translations of the Bible are coming out with regularity. Is there really a need for such new translations? Christians no doubt have various opinions on the matter.

Some Christians say we need new translations because English is an *evolving* language. Indeed, all languages are in a continual state of flux. No language stays virtually the same throughout history. This necessarily means that every Bible translation will eventually become out of date because its use of language will become out of date. This is nowhere more evident than in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, which has language that is not only archaic but has many words whose meanings have completely changed over time. For example, in James 5:11 we are told that "the Lord is very pitiful." In current usage, the word *pitiful* means "lamentable," "deplorable," "woeful," or "pathetic." But back in King James' days the word meant "one who has pity on others." Moreover, in James 2:3 in the KJV we find reference to a man entering a church in "gay" clothing. Today this would be interpreted as having some kind of homosexual meaning, whereas in King James' days the phrase referred to fine clothes.

With each new edition of the major English dictionaries, thousands of new words are introduced. Some people contend that because people in our country have varying levels of reading ability, various translations—ranging from very easy (short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs) to more advanced—are necessary.

Yet another reason for the need for new translations is that there is an ever-increasing percentage of people in our society—generally in the 18- to mid-30s age group—who are on the verge of bailing out of the church altogether. It is suggested that new translations, couched in more relevant and contemporary language, might contribute toward communicating God's timeless truths to our present generation.

Toward this end, once a translation is complete, it in itself may eventually be updated and improved. For example, the New American Standard Bible was updated in 1995. The Revised Standard Version was eventually updated to a more conservative English Standard Version. The Living Bible was eventually updated to the New Living Translation, which itself went through a revision a few years after its initial publication. It is all about communicating God's Word in an *accurate* yet *readable* way!

Tempering Initial Resistance

New translations are sometimes met with initial resistance. When the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament that predates the time of Christ) was published, one individual claimed it was "as calamitous for Israel as the day on which their fathers made the golden calf." When Jerome's Latin Vulgate was published, it was widely attacked as "heretical and subversive of the Christian faith." When Tyndale's translation of the New Testament was published, some claimed it was "so faulty a piece of work that revision was out of the question." All of this provides some helpful perspective regarding the loud criticisms often voiced against modern Bible translations.[19]