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First Words . . . Editorial Introduction

By Roger L. Omanson*

This issue of Review & Expositor focuses on Bible translation, approaching the topic from various perspectives. Philip Noss, the former Director of Translation Services for the United Bible Societies, has recently written, “No other book has been translated over such a long period of time as the Bible, portions of no other literary work have been rendered into as many languages, and no other document is today the object of such intense translation activity as the Bible.”

The earliest translation of the Bible seems to have been in the third century BCE when books of the Old Testament were translated into Greek in Alexandria in Egypt—the text we know as the Septuagint. Translation into other languages followed over the following centuries and increased considerably in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as missionaries spread throughout the world. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Bibles or parts of Bibles had been translated into nearly 2,500 languages. Many Bible-translation organizations are at work today throughout the world, including the Lutheran Bible Translators, the United Bible Societies (UBS), SIL (Wycliffe), New Tribes Mission, Pioneer Bible Translators, and the Sudan Interior Mission.

The histories and stories of many of these translations have been published. Raymond Rickards has written In Their Own Tongues: The Bible in the Pacific (Canberra: The Bible Society in Australia, 1996). Alooo Mojola has written of Bible translation in East Africa in God Speaks in Our Own Languages: Bible Translation in East Africa: 1844-1998 (United Bible Societies, 1999). The influence of the British and Foreign Bible Society in England, West Africa, East Asia, Russia, Europe, and North America has been told in Sowing the Word: the Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society: 1804-2004, ed. Stephen Batalden, Kathleen Cann, and John Dean (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004).

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* Roger L. Omanson is United Bible Societies Consultant for Scholarly Editions and Helps and lives in Louisville, Kentucky.
Numerous articles published in the United Bible Societies’ journal *The Bible Translator* have told the stories of Bible translation in Arabic, Arabic script in West Africa, Cherokee, Chinese, Georgian, Japanese, Lulogooli [Kenya], Mongolian, and Polish, just to name a few. Most recently, the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship at the American Bible Society has initiated a series of full-length histories of Bible translations. The first volume in the series, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, has been written by John David Ekem.

The articles in this issue of *Review & Expositor* begin with a lengthy article by Mark Strauss that addresses an issue much debated within churches today: is a literal translation better (i.e., more faithful to the original text) than a functional equivalent translation? Strauss correctly notes that “All translations exist on a continuum between form and function.” His thesis is “that while there are important cautions and qualifications related to functional equivalence, there are fundamental flaws with formal equivalence as a theory of translation. This is because meaning not form is the goal of translation.” Strauss is Professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, California. He is the author of *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation & Gender Accuracy*, co-author with G. G. Scorgie and Steven M. Voth of *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World*, and author of numerous articles, including “Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate: A Response to Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*.

The second article, by Philip C. Stine, looks at the history of the King James Bible, whose 400th anniversary of publication was celebrated in 2011. Readers may be surprised to learn that the original KJV included the Apocrypha, which was normally included in printings until 1826; that the KJV was published in 1611 in two versions; that it is not known which was first; that numerous misprints and corrections were introduced over the years by different printers; that even today there are several different versions of the King James Bible published in America; and that there is no such thing as an original, flawless King James Bible. Stine, now retired, was for many years a UBS translation consultant in Africa and later the global coordinator of translation work and related research. He has authored, edited, and co-authored numerous books and articles on Bible translation, including *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years, Bridging the Gap: African Traditional Religion and Bible Translation*, and *Let the Words Be Written: The Lasting Influence of Eugene A. Nida*.

The third and fourth articles, by Rolf Schäfer and Roger Omanson and by Florian Voss and Roger Omanson, review the histories of the Hebrew and
Greek that have become the nearly universal basis for scholarly biblical study and for translation into languages around the world. Each of these articles concludes by considering why modern translations of the Bible often differ so much when they are based on the same Greek and Hebrew texts.

Schäfer, senior editor at the German Bible Society with responsibility for Old Testament scholarly editions, is a member of the editorial committee of Biblia Hebraica and editor of Lamentations in the Megilloth fascicle. Voss, senior editor at the German Bible Society with responsibility for New Testament scholarly editions, is especially involved in the preparation of revised editions of the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece (NA28) and the UBS Greek New Testament (UBS5). He is the author of Das Wort vom Kreuz und die menschliche Vernunft: Eine Untersuchung zur Soteriologie des I. Korintherbriefes. Omanson, who lives in Louisville, Kentucky, is a UBS Inter-Regional Translation Consultant and UBS Consultant for Scholarly Editions and Helps. He is the editor of The Bible Translator: Technical Papers, editor of I Must Speak to You Plainly: In Honor of Robert G. Bratcher, author of A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament, co-author of UBS Handbooks on 2 Corinthians, Esther, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, and 1-2 Chronicles, and author of numerous articles.

The fifth article, by Stephen Pattemore, looks at modern theories of translation and explains that “It is this understanding of translation as an act of communication, between specific people in a particular context, that underlies most modern theories of translation.” More specifically, Pattemore advocates the value of Relevance Theory in Bible translation, going into much more detail than Strauss, who also refers to Relevance Theory in his article. Pattemore is a UBS translation consultant living in Auckland, New Zealand. He is the author of Souls Under the Altar: Relevance Theory and the Discourse Structure of Revelation, The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis, and numerous articles, including “Framing Nida: The Relevance of Translation Theory in the United Bible Societies” in A History of Bible Translation, edited by Philip A. Noss.

The sixth and final article, by Lynell Zogbo, looks at issues of Bible translation in Africa and claims that translators and exeges working on the African continent face a number of unique challenges, but they benefit as well from some important advantages. Lynell Marchese Zogbo is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, where she also teaches Bible translation at the Faculté de Théologie Evangélique Alliance Chrétienne (FATEAC) and is editor of both the UBS Handbook series in French and the Sycomore, a journal for francophone translators. A specialist in the languages that constitute the Kru language family (primarily southern
These major articles are followed by two shorter articles in which exegesis and translation are united. Esteban Voth looks at Micah 6-7, asking the question “What does God expect of us?” Roger Omanson considers how 2 Cor 8:4 and 9:1 must be interpreted and translated within the larger context of Paul’s letters. Voth, who lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina, is the UBS Americas Area Translation Coordinator. He is the author of “Jeremiah” in the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, co-author of The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World and is the author of numerous articles, including “Justice and/or Righteousness: A Contextualized Analysis of ēdeq in the KJV (English) and RVR (Spanish)” in that same volume. He was a member of the translation teams for both La Nueva Versión Internacional and La Biblia en lenguaje sencillo.


A Word From . . . An Old-Time Baptist

By Bill J. Leonard*

As a historian and an “old-time” Baptist, I confess some ambivalence over recent issues raised by controversies surrounding the role of religion in the American public square. Such topics seem rampant in North Carolina, where I live. Conservative Christians—including many Baptists—are funding a legal appeal won by the local ACLU, which challenged the County Commissioners of Forsyth County, North Carolina, to insist that local religionists should refrain from offering sectarian prayers at its weekly meetings. The result was a heated debate, centered primarily in this question: Should public prayer at government-based events be deity-specific, as with “in Jesus’ name we pray,” or should they be generic? The courts initially ruled that sectarian prayers are inappropriate, now the case has moved into the appellate system.

In another case, a prominent conservative Baptist invited to pray at a session of the North Carolina legislature, was asked beforehand to avoid praying specifically in Jesus’ name. Due to his protests, the legislature has determined to revisit the policy. In another instance, some 5000 citizens gathered to protest efforts to remove the Christian flag from a local military memorial. In each of these cases, protestors charge that their religious liberty is being violated, insisting that these changes are evidence of religious “persecution” against Christians and the historic Christian identity of America.

Concerning public prayer, those who favor specificity insist that, for conscience sake, they are compelled to pray only from the context of an explicit religious tradition. They contend that prayer is at its best when born of a particular faith, evident in such ancient confessions as: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One;” “In Jesus’ name,” or “There is no God but God, and

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*Bill J. Leonard is Professor of Church History at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
Mohammed is his prophet.” These and other tradition-based prayers provide a history that anchors a distinct faith. If representatives of faith communities are invited to pray at government-sanctioned events, they should be free to pray as they wish.

On the other side are those who raise issues of pluralism and privilege. They suggest that if government agencies require prayer in public events, then prayers should be as open and inclusive as possible given the diverse constituencies present. Many opt for silence as the best way to allow individuals to pray or not pray as they might choose.

As a Baptist, I understand something of the concerns of both sides. Governments should not tell people how to pray nor should government officials become the “prayer police.” People should exercise conscience to pray as they wish, even when it draws lines of division and dispute. Yet as an old-time Baptist, I am suspicious of government-initiated “prayer times” since they inevitably privilege one voice at the expense of others, undermining the very nature of prayer itself. Indeed, government-based gatherings by their very nature bring together persons with diverse religious opinions, many of whom vehemently disagree over how, why or whether to pray.

Perhaps seventeenth-century Baptists offer insights for this dilemma. Those Baptists were among the first to insist that since God alone is judge of conscience, neither the state nor established church can judge the conscience of the heretic or the atheist. Their commitment to a Believers’ Church in which every member claimed an experience of grace introduced a revolutionary pluralism centered in the idea that faith should not be coerced by the state or the majority religion. Each individual was judged by God alone for the faith he or she did or did not manifest. Their radical view of religious liberty was based on their radical view of experiential faith. What might their radical, dissenting views teach us today?

First, those dissenters would insist that no government body has the right to control the conscience and freedom of any individual by compelling any kind of prayer. If prayer is offered at government events, then all persons should be free to pray as they choose, but no one kind of prayer should be privileged. If all voices cannot be heard, then none should be permitted.

Second, as dissenters, they would also suggest that prayer, even in public, can be messy. Those who pray from inside a tradition may not always be able to “make nice” where governments are concerned. Jews have every right to call on God to judge those leaders who “sell the poor for a pair of shoes” (Amos 2:6). Christians might invoke similar concern for those officials who ignore communal responsibility to feed the hungry, clothe the naked,
and deal humanely with the imprisoned. (Matthew 25). Muslims might ask God to visit justice on those who “devour the property of orphans unjustly” (Sura IV: 5). Such religion-specific prayers could create significant discomfort at public meetings, yet prayers that are polite but never prophetic may not be real prayers at all. If politicians want “genuine” prayer at their meetings they had best batten down the hatches.

Third, seventeenth-century Baptists would warn us to beware of majoritarian religion. In fact, majoritarian language for privileging particular religious communities caused seventeenth-century Baptists great concern. They might warn us religious majorities come and go all too easily. Colonial Baptists were exiled, jailed, and fined by New England Puritans and Virginia Anglicans because they were an unacceptable minority, deemed unfit to exercise their heretical religion in the public square.

Truth is, in spite of the language of freedom and “separation of church and state,” religious majorities in the U.S. often grant liberty grudgingly to immigrant minorities who bring their religions with them. Majority Protestants hung Quakers in Boston in the 1660s, shot Mormons in Nauvoo, Illinois in the 1840s, and Catholics on the streets of Louisville, Kentucky in the 1850s. African American churches were burned throughout the twentieth century, and contemporary plans to construct mosques in various locations have unleashed great anger at Muslims in general. Sadly, religions are always tempted to cling to privilege often without recognizing it. In fact, recent demands for Christian-specific prayers or symbols at government meetings or property may represent the death rattle of Protestant privilege, especially in the American South.

But pluralism does not mean that religious groups must adopt syncretistic positions, that is, compromise their most dramatic and divisive views in order to participate in the public square. Rather, in a religiously pluralistic society, all persons have voice and are free to express their views in ways that distinguish their theology or foster debate. In a pluralistic environment, however, conviction in one religious community may be interpreted as bigotry in the larger culture.

Given those realities, perhaps many seventeenth-century Baptists (and a few “old-time” twenty-first-century ones) would recommend this strategy: Let us encourage our churches, mosques, synagogues and other faith communities to pray consistently for our elected leaders whenever we gather for prayer and worship. On those occasions we can call upon God (by whatever name) to look with favor, inspiration or judgment on all our political leaders. If government agencies persist in conducting public prayer, we can
only hope that they give voice to as many diverse religious groups as possible and that those prayers will be appropriately (or inappropriately) prophetic. For myself, I resist invitations to pray at government-sponsored events lest my conscience be compromised, privileged, or ignored by the kingdoms of this world. As a Baptist, I must pray from inside a tradition, but cannot in good conscience acquiesce to implicit or explicit religio-political establishments that privilege one voice over another. I learned that from a bunch of seventeenth-century dissenters who demanded radical religious liberty for heretic and atheist alike. For us “old-time” Baptists, that remains the gospel truth.
A Word About . . . Pastors, Scholars, and the Future of the Church

By Cameron Jorgenson*

Two years ago I was ordained. As I expected, the experience was meaningful and deeply moving; what I did not anticipate, however, was that a question raised by my ordination council would linger, provoking an ongoing struggle to understand better the academic and ministerial vocations, the nature of theological education, and what these things have to do with the future of the church.

Of all the questions that were posed that afternoon, one was particularly captivating. A professor serving on my ordination council asked whether I planned to make the same mistake as so many other seminary professors, that is, to urge the best and brightest students to pursue PhD studies and a life in the academy rather than the pastorate. He was dismayed by what he perceived to be an increasingly common story: excellent students jumping on the “academic track,” without a second thought, as if the pastorate were beneath them—a trend he urged me to buck for the sake of the vitality of the church.

That pointed question put its finger on the tension in divinity schools and seminaries around the issue of vocation. I began to wonder, Why does it seem that so many are uneasy about the work of the church? What unintended messages are received during one’s theological education (e.g., “Those who can, teach”)? What does it mean to be an academic preparing people for the work of ministry? What is the relationship between the lectern and the pulpit, the academic and the pastor, or (to borrow from Tertullian) Athens and Jerusalem?

To whatever degree a split exists between the intellectual and the ecclesial, it is to the detriment of both. Let us not forget that, in the words of D. H. Williams, “there are very few examples in the patristic era where the writer of

* Cameron Jorgenson is Assistant Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at The Divinity School of Campbell University in Buies Creek, North Carolina.
surviving scriptural commentaries, apologetics, theological hymns, or doctrinal treatises was not a pastor,” and it is this rich intellectual output that drew the young and restless Augustine to the church.1 The thinking life of the church is inseparable from its missional life. It is critical engagement with the faith that prevents the Christian Gospel from being reduced to yet another product on the “self-help” shelf. It is the life of the mind that makes the church a safe harbor for the likes of “Doubting Thomas,” restless Augustine, and precise Aquinas, creating space to seek answers to the big, or even threatening, questions.

Anecdotally, I can attest that some students do feel a tension between the academic and the ecclesial, especially those with intellectual gifts and a great deal of uncertainty about their place in the contemporary church. They ask good questions. For instance: Must one be an entrepreneur in order to be a competent shepherd to a flock? Can an introvert survive the gauntlet of potlucks and glad-handing involved in pastoral ministry? In a culture of buzzwords and sound-bites, is there room for an intellectual in the church, much less the pulpit?

Wrestling with these questions led me to the data collected annually from MDiv graduates by the Association of Theological Schools.2 What I discovered about the career plans of Divinity School students, academically inclined or not, startled me.

In the 2001-02 school year, 7.3% of MDiv graduates declared that they had some form of continued academic ambition; in 2009-10 the proportion plummeted to 4.5%.3 While this is a surprising decrease, it is a more robust total than the previous year’s record low of 2.2%. Based on these numbers, it would seem that worries of a stampede away from the pulpit and into the classroom are unfounded. But the story might be even more complex than that.

Among MDiv graduates over the past nine years, there is a significant, steady decline in the number of those anticipating full-time ministry employment in congregations, dropping from 60.7% in 2001-2, to 47% in 2009-10.4 During the same period, the rate of those describing their post-graduation employment as “Other” “Undecided” or “None,” rose from 16.8% to 30.8%.5

Students are approaching the future, whether in the church or in the academy, with ambivalence—and for good reason. Competition for admission and funding to doctoral programs has never been fiercer, and the quest for an open faculty position is the stuff reality shows are made of. Beginning a
life of service to the church is hardly better, a tale
told well by the long list of short-lived pastorates.

So, how are divinity schools to respond to these
challenges? How might students be served best in
their pursuit of vocational fidelity?

One practical solution can be seen in the
ministry residency program sponsored by the
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Initiative for
Ministerial Excellence. This program places recent MDiv graduates in “teaching
churches” that provide two years of paid pastoral residency. The genius of
this program is that it provides a healthy context for full-time ministry where
new ministers can hone their skills, rather than jumping immediately into the
“sink-or-swim” scenario of a traditional new pastorate. Expanding
programs like this would help students to gain confidence and wisdom for a
lifetime of successful work in the church.

Aside from practical concerns, there is a very basic way that theological
schools could help students: by remembering their purpose. Seminaries and
divinity schools exist to train women and men to respond to their vocation.
The goal of faculty members cannot be to advance the individual academic
guilds in which they participate; rather, it must be to train students to serve
the church with excellence. This is not to downplay the importance of
academic pursuits—quite the opposite; ministerial excellence requires
intellectual rigor—but the goal is not to make more disciples of some trend in
contemporary theology or the hottest new methods in New Testament
research, the goal is to produce well-formed ministers.\textsuperscript{6}

Perhaps if we remembered our purpose we would simultaneously train
better ministers (i.e., by reminding them why they are memorizing those
dates or parsing those Greek verbs) while modeling how the life of the mind
relates to the task of ministry, enabling students to go and do likewise. Maybe,
by pursuing creative new partnerships with healthy church “laboratories,”
we can help seminarians discover their unique place of service.

The question posed at my ordination was correct in one important way:
it would be tragic for a professor to cram students into an ill-fitting vocational
box. Our task, to tweak a phrase by Parker Palmer, is to “let their life speak.”
We must, therefore, walk with students through the wilderness to help them
find the burning bush, reminding them to take off their shoes, since they are
on holy ground.
1 Retriving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 144.

2 See “Archived GSQ Total School profiles” at: http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Student/Pages/Graduating StudentQuestionnaire.aspx

3 Respondents were counted as having “academic ambitions” if they selected “College/University,” “Seminary,” or “Further Graduate Study” as their “position expected after graduation.”

4 Respondents were reckoned as pursuing congregational ministry if they selected “Parish Ministry,” “Church Administration,” “Youth Ministry,” “Church Musician,” or, “Christian Education.”

5 These trends can be seen most clearly in the data below:

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6 In the case of those exploring a call to academic scholarship, one aspect of their vocational training will be to acquire competence as a budding member of a scholarly guild.
Thematic Words
Bible Translation and the Myth of “Literal Accuracy”

By Mark L. Strauss

ABSTRACT

A widespread belief among many pastors, Bible teachers, and laypeople holds that the most accurate Bible translation is one that is “literal” or formal equivalent. This is a misunderstanding of the nature of languages, which differ significantly from one another in terms of words (lexemes), syntax, and idioms. This article looks at the fallacy of “literal accuracy” by showing how the differences between languages mean that one must alter the form of the Hebrew and Greek text in order accurately to reproduce the meaning in English. Seeking lexical concordance (word-for-word reproduction) does not work, since words do not have a single “literal” meaning. They have a range of potential senses. Since these senses differ across languages, one must first interpret each word in Hebrew or Greek and then render it with an equivalent word or phrase in English. Similarly, syntactic correspondence does not work, since languages use different grammatical forms, idioms, and collocations to produce the same meanings. Replicating grammatical forms inevitably results in changed meaning, awkward language, and/or obscurity. Indeed, all Bible versions—even those that claim to be “essentially literal”—consistently change forms to reproduce the meaning. While so-called “literal” versions are useful tools for beginning language students to help them identify formal features of the Greek or Hebrew text, as a philosophy of translation formal equivalence is fundamentally flawed.

1 Mark Strauss is Professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, California.
Introduction: The Rise of Meaning-Based Bible Translation

The 1980s and 1990s may rightly be called the heyday of functional equivalence in Bible translation. During these decades the meaning-based translation theories associated especially with Eugene Nida, the United Bible Societies, and Wycliffe Bible Translators (SIL) flourished both in the English-speaking world and in the world of international Bible translation. Nida originally referred to his method as “dynamic equivalence,” later adopting the more appropriate “functional equivalence.” The first English version to consciously adopt this method was Today’s English Version (TEV; also known as the Good News Bible [GNB] and now referred to as the Good News Translation [GNT]). The New Testament, translated by Robert Bratcher under the auspices of the American Bible Society, was published in 1966 as Good News for Modern Man. The whole Bible followed in 1976. Even before the GNT, various attempts had been made to produce translations that reflected contemporary English idiom. A number of such versions appeared in the early twentieth century, including The New Testament in Modern Speech (1903), produced by Richard Weymouth; The Twentieth Century New Testament (1904), a committee production; The New Testament: A New Translation (1913, 1926) by James Moffatt; and The New Testament: An American Translation (1923) by Edgar J. Goodspeed. All of these sought to translate the Bible into clear and contemporary English. Goodspeed, in a statement with remarkable affinity to later dynamic equivalence theory, wrote “I wanted my translation to make on the reader something of the impression the New Testament must have made on it earliest readers.” This vivid relevance was the particular concern of works like J. B. Phillips’ New Testament in Modern English (1958) and Kenneth Taylor’s enormously popular Living Bible, Paraphrased (1971). For many readers, Taylor’s dynamic and idiomatic renderings brought to life what had previously been a closed and incomprehensible book.

Since all Bible translation utilizes both formal and functional equivalence, it is impossible to categorize versions simply as either one or the other. All translations exist on a continuum between form and function. The New International Version (NIV; 1978; rev. 1984, 2011), the most popular version in the English-speaking

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-Edgar Goodspeed

All translations exist on a continuum between form and function.
world, claims to be a middle-of-the-road or mediating version between these two translation theories. Indeed, most contemporary English versions profess to seek the perfect balance between accuracy and readability. Bible translators frequently coin terms like “optimal equivalence” (Holman Christian Standard Bible), “literal-idiotic” (International Standard Version), and “closest natural equivalent” (God’s Word) to express this balance.\(^4\) It is beyond dispute, however, that the last quarter century has seen the proliferation of more idiomatic Bible versions. In addition to those cited above, recent English versions that have been heavily influenced, either directly or indirectly, by functional equivalence include the New English Bible (NEB; 1970); the Jerusalem Bible (JB; 1966); the New American Bible (NAB; 1970; rev. 2011); the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB; 1986); the New Century Version (NCV; 1991; rev. 2005); the Revised English Bible (REB; 1989); The Message (1994); God’s Word (1995); the Contemporary English Version (CEV; 1995); the New Living Translation (NLT; 1996; rev. 2004; 2007); the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB; 2003); and the Common English Bible (NT; 2010).

This flourishing of functional equivalence does not mean that formal equivalent versions have lost their influence in the English-speaking world. The King James Version, like its predecessors, took a predominantly formalist approach, and its revisions have continued this tradition:\(^5\) the Revised Version (RV; 1881-85); the American Standard Version (ASV; 1901); the Revised Standard Version (RSV; 1952); the New American Standard Bible (NASB; 1971, rev. 1995); the New King James Version (NKJV; 1982); the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV; 1990); and now the English Standard Version (ESV; 2001). There are at least six widely available English Bibles that strive for formal equivalence (KJV, RSV, NKJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV). The KJV is still the second largest selling version in Christian stores (behind the NIV), the NKJV is third, the ESV is fifth, and the NASB is tenth.\(^6\) In light of this, it seems a bit odd that in a Christianity Today article written a decade ago, Raymond Van Leeuwen argued that “We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation,” “one that works from a different theory than FE [functional equivalence].”\(^7\) The title of the article suggests that there is a dearth of formal equivalent versions and a commensurate overload of functional equivalent versions. Yet while functional equivalence is dominant in the world of international Bible translation, this is clearly not the case in the English-speaking world, where many pastors and churchgoers (and some scholars) still favor formal equivalence.
Indeed, the last decade or so has seen a resurgence in formal equivalence as a translation theory, a trend D. A. Carson calls “the rise of linguistic conservatism.” This may be seen, on the one hand, in strong promotion of an “essentially literal” approach by certain Christian leaders. It is also evident in a number of articles and books criticizing functional equivalence as a translation theory. Some of these accept functional equivalence as a legitimate method that plays an important role in the church, but warn of its weaknesses and criticize its dominance in the field. Others consider functional equivalence to be fundamentally flawed as a translation theory, replacing God’s inspired words with loose and inaccurate “paraphrase.”

Another very different critique of functional equivalence should be mentioned briefly. This movement arose from within the world of international Bible translation and is associated especially with the works of Ernst-August Gutt and other advocates of an approach to communication known as Relevance Theory. Gutt criticizes functional equivalence as a theory of translation not because it departs from literal translation, but because it rests on an inadequate code model of communication, which does not account sufficiently for the inferential and context-dependent nature of human communication. Gutt’s theories have resulted in a lively debate within the United Bible Societies (UBS), SIL, and other Bible translation agencies, but have (yet) had little impact on the world of biblical scholarship and almost none on the world of popular Christianity. In these latter contexts, the “literal versus dynamic” debate remains central. Advocates of Relevance Theory do not advocate literal translation, recognizing that the differences between languages make formal equivalence an inappropriate goal. They rather promote a more inferential and context-sensitive model of translation, which seeks to take into account the very different cognitive environments and audience assumptions of source and receptor cultures.

While these are important questions, they are beyond the scope of the present article, the goal of which is to demonstrate the inadequacies of formal equivalence as a translation theory. My plan will be to establish the basic goal of translation, and then to evaluate the manner in which formal equivalence pursues this goal.
The Goal of Translation: Communicating the Meaning

Before we can establish the legitimacy of a translation theory, we must identify the goal of translation. A simple definition would be to communicate the meaning of a text in one language (the source language) so that it is accurately understood in a second language (the receptor language). While this is straightforward enough, the debate concerns how best to transfer the message to the receptor language audience. Advocates of formal equivalence, also known as literal or word-for-word translation, claim that the formal structure of the source language should be retained as much as possible. Advocates of functional equivalence, also known as dynamic equivalence, meaning-based translation or idiomatic translation, stress the need to produce an equivalent meaning in the receptor language, regardless of the form. In general, formal equivalence gives greater prominence to the source language, particularly its formal structure. Functional equivalence—in theory at least—gives equal prominence to source and receptor languages, stressing that both the meaning of the original and the comprehension of the readers are essential components of translation. Formal equivalence places greater stress on individual words (hence, “word-for-word”), functional equivalence, on the semantic function of phrases and clauses.

Translation is an inexact science and art and some meaning will be lost with every translation decision. There are significant challenges and potential pitfalls related to any translation theory. The most common criticism against functional equivalence is that it oversimplifies the text at the expense of the nuances of the original. Yet advocates of functional equivalence have long acknowledged these concerns, and the theoretical and practical literature is full of cautions, clarifications, and caveats. For example: (1) Translators seeking functional equivalence should not depart from the meaning of the text in its original cultural and historical context in the pursuit of contemporary relevance. While eliminating linguistic distance (non-English idioms, archaisms, awkward or obscure language), they should retain historical distance, seeking to transport modern readers to the ancient world of the text. (2) Translators must become aware not only of language differences, but also of differences of background,
culture, and context between the source language author and the receptor language audience in order effectively to bridge the gap between the two. (3) Translators should seek to retain the literary style, register, and sophistication of the biblical authors, rather than leveling the text to a single remedial style. (4) They should seek inasmuch as possible to retain verbal and literary allusions when these allusions were important to the meaning of the text. (5) They should retain ambiguity if and when the original author was intentionally ambiguous. (6) They should reproduce metaphors and metaphorical idioms in cases where those metaphors were “live”—that is, where they retained their conceptual imagery for the original readers. I have discussed these and other cautions related to functional equivalence elsewhere.

My thesis in this article is that while there are important cautions and qualifications related to functional equivalence, there are fundamental flaws with formal equivalence as a theory of translation. This is because meaning not form is the goal of translation.

Anyone who has ever learned a second language quickly recognizes this. Consider the following Spanish phrases, translated literally and then functionally:

¿Cómo se llama?
  Literal: “How yourself call?”
  Idiomatic: “What’s your name?”

_Tengo hambre._
  Literal: “I have hunger”
  Idiomatic: “I’m hungry.”

_Me gusta la sopa_
  Literal: “Me pleases the soup.”
  Idiomatic: “I like the soup.”

¿Cuántos años tienes?
  Literal: “How many years have you?”
  Idiomatic: “How old are you?”

These examples make it clear that those who do real life translation practice idiomatic translation rather than literal translation. Yet when we turn to Bible translation, the opposite is often asserted, that literal means “accurate” and idiomatic means loose and “inaccurate.” This assertion runs counter to the nature of languages, which use different forms to express the same meaning.
The goal of a literal or formal equivalent translation is to reproduce the form of the Greek and Hebrew as much as possible. In its more nuanced form, this is often stated, “As literal as possible, as free as necessary.” In other words, the translator stays with one-to-one correspondence until it is necessary to alter this for the sake of meaning. Notably, however, even this statement correctly gives veto power to meaning over form. Formal correspondence should be utilized if it produces equivalence of meaning. The ultimate goal is not formal equivalence, but functional equivalence—the communication of a message. The assumption of many practitioners seems to be that these two are the same, and that if you attain formal equivalence you have reached semantic equivalence. As we will see, however, this is far from the case, since the formal structures of Hebrew and Greek are very different from the formal structures of English (or any other language). Even versions that claim to be “essentially literal” are far from formally equivalent. They constantly fall back on idiomatic renderings whenever formal equivalence does not work. In other words, they give precedence to function or meaning over form. This is because translators intuitively recognize that in virtually every sentence, Greek and Hebrew idioms do not “work” the way English works. Thus, while translators of literal versions may be proceeding with a goal of formal equivalence (word-for-word replacement), their decisions are governed by a philosophy of functional equivalence (change the form whenever necessary to retain the meaning).

The problem comes when the perceived need to retain form affects translation decisions. The result is often awkward, unnatural, obscure, or incomprehensible English rather than a natural rendering that communicates to contemporary readers with the same clarity that the Greek or Hebrew communicated to the original readers.

Awkward and unnatural English translations often result from seeking to translate idioms word-for-word, without carefully considering the meaning. Consider Matt 5:2:

NKJV: Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:
RSV/ESV: And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:
NASB: And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying,
HCSB: Then he began to teach them, saying:
NIV: and he began to teach them, saying:
GNT: and he began to teach them
NLT: This is what he taught them:
The Greek idiom uses two phrases *anoígō to stoma* ("open the mouth") + *didaskō" ("teach") to express a single action. Opening the mouth and teaching are not two consecutive actions, but one act of formal speech (cf. Acts 8:35; 10:34; Rev 13:6). In English we would never say, "The professor opened his mouth and taught the class." This is a Greek idiom, not an English one.

Consider also Acts 11:22:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NKJV</td>
<td>Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCSB</td>
<td>Then the report about them reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV (1984):</td>
<td>News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV (2011):</td>
<td>News of this reached the church in Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNT</td>
<td>The news about this reached the church in Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLT</td>
<td>When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

None of these versions is actually word-for-word. The Greek, translated word-for-word (and adjusting word order), reads something like “but the word was heard into the ears of the church being in Jerusalem.” All of the versions significantly modify the Greek forms. Yet the more formal equivalent versions perceive the need to retain the Greek idiom “into the ears of…” (*eis ta óta tēs…*), although this is not English. I would never say “this came to my ears,” but rather “I heard this,” or “the news reached me.” The attempt to be “literal” has produced what scholars wryly call “Biblish,” an artificial translationese that mimics the syntactical forms of Hebrew or Greek. What sounded clear and natural to the original hearers now sounds awkward and unnatural.

Of course, these examples are merely awkward English. The reader can figure out the meaning even if what was natural in Hebrew or Greek is now unnatural English. Many idioms retained in literal versions are not only awkward, however, but they are also incomprehensible or misleading. Consider the following verses in the ESV, where an overly literal approach obscures the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek idiom.
Josh 10:6
ESV  Do not relax your hand from your servants….
NIV  Do not abandon your servants….
HCSB  Don’t abandon your servants….

2 Sam 18:25
ESV  And the king said, “If he is alone, there is news in his mouth.”
NIV  The king said, “If he is alone, he must have good news.”
HCSB  The king said, “If he’s alone, he bears good news.”

Amos 4:6
ESV  “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities.”
NIV  “I gave you empty stomachs in every city.”
HCSB  “I gave you absolutely nothing to eat in all your cities.”

Matt 23:32
ESV  Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.
NIV  Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!
HCSB  Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ sins!

Mark 1:2 (pars. Matt 11:10; Luke 7:27)
ESV  I send my messenger before your face….
NIV  I will send my messenger ahead of you….
HCSB  I am sending My messenger ahead of You….

ESV  So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem….
NIV  So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem….
HCSB  Saul was coming and going with them in Jerusalem….

2 Cor 6:15
ESV  …what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?
NIV  …what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?
HCSB  …what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

While these kinds of ESV renderings are probably exceptions rather than the norm, they illustrate the danger of translating an idiom literally without due consideration for standard English idiom. The NIV and HCSB versions get the idioms right not by following the literal form, but by (1) exegeting the
text to determine the meaning; and then (2) seeking the closest natural equivalent in the receptor language. To be “literal” is not to be accurate. The slogan “As literal as possible, as free as necessary” should be changed to a philosophy of translation that places the priority on meaning: “Translate the meaning; follow the form if and when it promotes this goal.”

I should add that I am not arguing against the production or use of formal equivalent Bible versions. These versions have an important role in Bible study, particularly for those with only a rudimentary knowledge of the original languages. They are helpful tools for (1) identifying the formal structure of the original text; (2) examining Hebrew or Greek idioms and formal patterns of language; (3) tracing recurrent words; (4) identifying ambiguities in the text; and (5) tracing formal verbal allusions (which idiomatic renderings might obscure).21 In short, they provide a window on the original text for those with limited skills in studying it directly.

An examination of the translation process will help to illuminate why formal equivalence fails as a theory or philosophy of translation.

Translation as Interpretation

Words are arbitrary and conventional symbols used to signify meaning. A word does not get its meaning from its sound or form, but from the conventional meaning attributed to it by a particular socio-linguistic group.22 The English word “gift” commonly means, “something bestowed voluntarily and without compensation.” In contrast, the same sounds in German (das Gift) mean “poison” (a very different kind of “gift”!). Nothing inherent in the form of the word determines its meaning. Words are conventional symbols that point to conceptual meaning.

The words or symbols of one language differ from the words or symbols of another. This is why translation is necessary. Not only are the words different, but the manner in which they interact and relate to one another—their syntactical relationships—is also different. Because there is no one-to-one correspondence between words (lexemes) or their relationships (syntax), translation always involves a two-step process. The translator must first determine the meaning of the symbols and the relationship between those symbols in the source language and then determine the best way to
communicate that meaning to the receptor audience. The goal of translation is not the reproduction of words, but the communication of meaning. In a book defending “essentially literal” translations, Leland Ryken disputes this basic translation model. In a chapter entitled “Seven Fallacies About Translation,” he rejects as fallacious that “We should translate meaning rather than words,” and that “All translation is interpretation.” He claims that by focusing on meaning, dynamic equivalent versions are wrongly “translating what they interpret the meaning of the original to be instead of first of all preserving the language of the original.”

This is a very odd statement. How can you “preserve the language of the original” when the source language words are all different from the receptor language words? Ryken seems to assume the literalist fallacy that the words and syntax of one language have exact counterparts in another, so that meaning transfer occurs automatically. He tries to avoid this obvious fallacy by distinguishing between “linguistic interpretation” and “thematic interpretation.” What Ryken means by “linguistic interpretation,” however, is limited to “decisions regarding what English words best express Hebrew or Greek words.” This is far too narrow a definition since languages differ greatly not only in word meanings, but also in syntax, idioms, connotations, collocations, and a host of other ways. The translator practicing only Ryken’s “linguistic interpretation” would have to render the Greek phrase pater hēmōn ho en tous ouranois in Matt 6:9 as “our Father the in the heavens,” instead of “Our Father in heaven...” (ESV; NIV) because the syntax of Greek and the syntax of English function very differently. One must first understand the message as a whole in the source language before one can communicate the message accurately through the receptor language. All translation involves interpretation.

Although utilizing a more nuanced linguistic approach, Raymond Van Leeuwen expresses concerns similar to Ryken’s. He claims that functional equivalent versions often practice interpretation that should be left to the reader. He writes, “It is hard to know what the Bible means when we are uncertain about what it says.” The claim is that formal equivalence tells us “directly” what the Bible says, while functional equivalence inappropriately interprets the meaning of text. This interpretation, in turn, may be wrong, or at best, may limit the reader to only one option. Such interpretation, he argues, should be left to commentaries.

One can certainly make a case for retaining intentional ambiguity when it is present in the original text. Furthermore, translators must be careful not
to exclude viable interpretations. Yet the statement “what the Bible says” is problematic from the start. The Bible is written in Hebrew and Greek, so every English translation changes every word of what the Bible says. Direct translation without interpretation is impossible since every word, phrase, and clause in Greek or Hebrew must first be interpreted before it can be translated accurately. Since it is impossible to have a translation that “says what the Bible says,” we need versions that mean what the Hebrew and Greek mean.

Van Leeuwen is well aware of this. At one point he writes that “translation is a difficult and, in some ways, impossible task. Translations always compromise and interpret.” He adds, “A translator’s first and most important job is to bridge the language gap. She seeks the best way of saying in English what was said first in Hebrew or Greek, but even this is not simple. No English word fully matches a Greek or Hebrew word.” Yet a few paragraphs later, he seems to contradict himself when he writes, “When our translations do not say what the Hebrew or Greek say, it is hard to know what the Bible means.”

The Goals and Problems of Formal Equivalence

When used in Bible translation, the term “literal” usually points to formal equivalence in two areas: (1) lexical concordance and (2) syntactical correspondence. Lexical concordance means seeking a one-to-one relationship between words in the source language and words in the receptor language. Syntactical correspondence means using the same grammatical forms when translating from one language to another. For example, if the Greek original uses a prepositional phrase, the English translation should also use a prepositional phrase. If the Greek uses an infinitive, the English should use an infinitive. Both of these goals are linguistically problematic and tend to promote a false view of language and translation.

The Fallacy of Lexical Concordance

Lexical concordance means consistently using the same English word for each Greek or Hebrew word. Of course, almost all translators acknowledge that strict lexical concordance is impossible. The same Greek term logos can mean “word” (Matt 7:24), “command” (Matt 8:16), “message” (Matt 13:19), “question” (Matt 21:24), “financial account” (Matt 25:19), “story” (Matt 28:15),
“matter” (Mark 9:10), “narrative account” (Acts 1:1), and a host of other things. Translating each occurrence as “word” results in mistranslation.

Basic principles of lexical semantics—the study of word meanings—make clear why lexical concordance is impossible.

First, Greek and Hebrews words (called lexemes), like words in any language, seldom have a single, all-encompassing meaning, but rather a range of potential senses. This range of senses is called the lexeme’s semantic range. The context and co-text reveal which sense the author intended. The Greek lexeme charis has a semantic range that includes various senses, “grace,” “favor,” “credit,” “gift,” “thanks,” “kindness,” etc. Consider the following utterances (from the NIV):

For it is by grace (charis) you have been saved, through faith… (Eph 2:8)
“Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor (charis) with God.” (Luke 1:30)
He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill (charis) of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Acts 7:10)
If you love those who love you, what credit (charis) is that to you? (Luke 6:32)
Would he thank (charis) the servant because he did what he was told to do? (Luke 17:9)

Most words do not have a single literal (core, basic) meaning, but rather a semantic range—a range of potential senses actualized by the utterances in which they appear.

None of these senses represents the “literal” meaning of charis. All are rather potential senses within the lexeme’s semantic range. Most words do not have a single literal (core, basic) meaning, but rather a semantic range—a range of potential senses actualized by the utterances in which they appear.

Second, words normally have only one sense in any particular context.31 In the examples above, it would be wrong to assume that Joseph gained “grace” (= undeserved favor) from Pharaoh (he worked for it), or, conversely, that we are saved through the “credit” we gain. While there may be some interplay between senses in various contexts, these senses do not necessarily force their meanings on one other. James Barr speaks of “illegitimate totality transfer,” the fallacy of assuming that the whole of a lexeme’s semantic range is somehow contained in any single occurrence.32

Third, words may be synonymous, or nearly synonymous, in some contexts but not in others. There is seldom if ever exact synonymy between
words, either within a language or across languages. In some contexts, the Greek lexemes *sarx* and *sōma* mean essentially the same thing, the physical body. In Eph 5:29 NIV, Paul says, “no one ever hated their own body (*sarx*), but they feed and care for their body....” In many other contexts, *sarx* carries the negative sense “sin nature” or “fallen humanity,” which *sōma* does not. Their semantic ranges overlap in some contexts but not in others. The same thing happens across languages. The sense of the English lexeme “grace” may overlap in some contexts but not in others with Greek *charis*.

Fourth, all lexical choices are approximations of meaning. When I say, “*charis* means ‘grace,’” I am rendering a judgment about the closest English equivalent for *charis* in this context. “Grace” is merely an English gloss that the translator chooses to try to capture the sense of *charis*. *Charis* may carry nuances of meaning in this sentence that “grace” does not, and vice versa. Furthermore, two or more English words may function as well in this context—say “grace” and “favor.” Alternatively, one word may capture one nuance of *charis* slightly better, while the other captures another nuance. The selection of words in translation is an inexact science, and always entails some ambiguity and loss of meaning. Translators, then, must be in a constant mode of interpretation, seeking to identify English lexemes that reproduce the sense of Greek or Hebrew lexemes in each context. They may simplify their method by trying out the primary sense of a lexeme first. The primary sense is the most common one in a particular body of literature, but the primary sense cannot be called the “literal” sense. Simply replacing Greek words with their primary English equivalents without considering the contextual meaning violates the fundamentals of lexical semantics.

The differences in word meanings across languages are particularly evident when studying collocational relationships, meanings achieved through a word’s relationship with another word (called its collocate). In English, for example, I can make pancakes, make trouble, make sergeant, make sense, make war, make a shirt, make friends, make a plane (= catch), make a deal, make a difference, make a vow, make love, make a law, make someone leave, make Paris in one day (= reach). This illustrates the broad semantic range of the English lexeme “make,” but it also shows that its collocational relationships with other words determine the sense of “make.”

This is significant for our discussion since collocational relationships change across languages. For example, we teach beginning Greek students
that the Greek verb for “make” is *poieō*. Yet *poieō* would not provide an adequate translation for most of the collocates mentioned above. In Greek, you do not make trouble, make a difference, make a vow, make love, or make a deal. The inverse is also true. There are many collocates with *poieō* that make little sense in English. Below in Table 1 is a sampling of these. I have translated *poieō* “literally” in the middle column and then given an English translation in the right. I have taken these from the NASB to show that even a (supposedly) formal equivalent translation recognizes that (1) *poieō* does not literally mean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>“Literal” rendering of <em>poieō</em></th>
<th>NASB translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matt 3:8</td>
<td>Make fruit</td>
<td>Bring forth fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt 6:1</td>
<td>Make righteousness</td>
<td>Practice righteousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt 6:2</td>
<td>Make alms</td>
<td>Give alms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt 7:22</td>
<td>Make miracles</td>
<td>Perform miracles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt 7:24</td>
<td>Make lawlessness</td>
<td>Commit lawlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt 22:2</td>
<td>Make a feast</td>
<td>Give a feast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt 26:18</td>
<td>Make Passover</td>
<td>Keep Passover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 3:14</td>
<td>Make Twelve</td>
<td>Appoint Twelve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 15:1</td>
<td>Make a council</td>
<td>Hold a consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 4:32</td>
<td>Make branches [a tree]</td>
<td>Form branches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 15:7</td>
<td>Make murder</td>
<td>Commit murder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 15:15</td>
<td>Make sufficient the crowd</td>
<td>Satisfy the crowd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke 1:68</td>
<td>Make redemption</td>
<td>Accomplish redemption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke 1:72</td>
<td>Make mercy</td>
<td>Show mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke 2:48</td>
<td>Make us thusly</td>
<td>Treat us this way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 3:21</td>
<td>Make truth</td>
<td>Practice the truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts 7:24</td>
<td>Make vengeance</td>
<td>Take vengeance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rom 9:28</td>
<td>Make a word</td>
<td>Execute His word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cor 11:25</td>
<td>Make sin</td>
<td>Commit sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gal 5:3</td>
<td>Make the law</td>
<td>Keep the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eph 2:3</td>
<td>Make the desires of the flesh</td>
<td>Indulge the desires of the flesh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“make”; and (2) there is no one-to-one correspondence between source and receptor languages either at the level of word meanings or of collocational relationships. This is a very small sampling of just one lexeme.

So what does poieō “literally” mean? Make? Do? Bring forth? Practice? Give? Perform? Commit? Keep? Appoint? Hold? Form? Satisfy? Accomplish? Show? Treat? Execute? Indulge? Even the NASB—one of the most literal English translations—recognizes that it can mean any of these things (and many more), depending on its context and collocations. The real problem is not that poieō has so many different senses (though that is true), it is that English and Greek say the same thing in very different ways. We could, for example, take any one of the English translations above—say “keep”—and build another list of its collocates (keep time, keep quiet, keep out, keep horses, keep away, keep records, keep shop, keep arguing, etc.). You would then need a variety of Greek words, phrases and idioms to express the correct meaning of each of these collocations. This brings us back to the fundamental thesis of this paper: In translation, meaning must always take precedence over form.

The literal translator recognizes that poieō often does not mean “make,” but still argues that, inasmuch as possible, the same English word should be used for each word in Hebrew and Greek. If, however, the goal of translation is meaning, then the correct question is not, “Is ‘make’ an adequate translation?” but “What is the meaning of poieō in this context?” and “What English word, expression or idiom best captures this sense?”

Of course, there are times when a word represents an intentional verbal allusion to another passage that uses the same Greek or Hebrew term with a different sense. A good example is 1 Cor 3:10, where Paul identifies himself as a “wise [sophos] master builder” (NASU, NKJV; cf. NIV 2011), who has laid the foundation for the Corinthian church. Many versions recognize that “wise” is not a normal English adjective to describe a builder and so translate sophos as “skilled” (ESV, HCSB, NRSV) or “expert” (NLT, NIV [1984], CEV, GNT). While these accurately represent the meaning in context, they lose an important verbal allusion, since throughout 1 Corinthians 1-3 Paul has repeatedly used the adjective sophos (“wise”) and the noun sophia (“wisdom”) to contrast the true wisdom of God with the false wisdom of the world. A “wise” builder builds on God’s wisdom, which is found in a crucified Messiah.35

In cases like this, the translator must decide whether it is more important to retain the verbal allusion or the most natural sense of the word in context. In either case, something will be lost in the translation. The translator must decide whether it is more important to retain the verbal allusion or the most natural sense of the word in context. In either case, something will be lost in the translation.
While the original NIV used the word “expert” in 1 Cor 3:10, the 2011 revision rendered sophos as “wise” in order to capture the verbal allusion. Translators must make hard decisions concerning what to retain and what to sacrifice.

While all Bible translators recognize that words can mean different things in different contexts, they often slip into the fallacy that there is one “literal” sense that should be retained for the sake of accuracy. The NASB translates Matt 24:22 “And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved....” A footnote alerts the reader that the word “life” is “Lit., flesh.” In one sense this is true, if “literal” is understood to mean “non-figurative.” The primary non-figurative sense of sarx is “body tissue” (i.e., “flesh”). Other senses such as “human body,” “life,” “humanity,” and “sinful nature” are metaphorical expansions. But this is not what the NASB translators mean by “literal.” They would never have written, “Lit., body tissue.” They have instead fallen into the fallacy that “flesh” is somehow the core or basic meaning of sarx. On the contrary, “life” or “human being” is just as much a part of the semantic range as “flesh,” and is clearly the sense intended in Matt 24:22.

Some recent English versions use the designation “Greek” instead of “literally.” The NRSV, ESV, NLT and the New English Translation (NET Bible) have adopted this designation. The ESV reads in Rom 3:20, “For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight....” A footnote alerts the reader that “human being” is “Greek flesh.” While this may seem more sophisticated, in fact it compounds the error. First, readers are told they are about to hear a Greek word, but are then given an English one. To be accurate, the translation should read “Greek sarx.” Second, the note suggests that “flesh” is somehow closer to the Greek than “human being.” Again, however, “human being” is just as much a part of the semantic range of sarx as “flesh” and is clearly the sense intended here. What the translators are trying to communicate is that sarx has a complex semantic range with much interplay between senses. The problem is, in making this point, they promote a false and misleading view of language and translation.

Another example of this error is the ESV’s rendering of doulos. Acts 16:17 ESV reads “These men are servants of the Most High God.” While translating douloi as “servants,” a marginal note tells the reader “Greek bondservants,” although the Greek word is not “bondservant,” but doulos. Of course, the translators are trying to inform the reader that doulos means a servant owned
as a slave, but if *doulos* means “bondservant,” why not translate it that way? If the translators cannot decide whether the English lexemes “servant,” “bondservant” or “slave” most accurately represent the meaning of *doulos*, then the note should offer an alternate translation, “Or bondservant.”

A third example of this error is the NRSV’s translation of the Greek plural noun *adelphoi*. The NRSV seeks to be gender inclusive and so consistently translates *adelphoi* as “brothers and sisters” throughout the Epistles. This is perfectly acceptable, since “brothers and sisters” is part of the semantic range of *adelphoi*, well attested both in secular Greek and in the New Testament. This is clearly what Paul meant in these contexts. Yet whenever the NRSV translates “brothers and sisters,” a footnote alerts the reader that the Greek is “brothers.” This is a lexical fallacy. First, the Greek word is not “brothers”; it is *adelphoi*. Second, *adelphoi* does not have a literal meaning, but a range of possible senses, and in these contexts, that sense is “brothers and sisters.”

All of this evidence means that most claims, in both popular and scholarly literature, about the “literal” meaning of a word are wrong, based on a naïve understanding of lexical semantics. Sometimes “literal” is used in the sense of *primary* or most common meaning. More often, literal means “the first meaning taught to beginning Greek students,” as in “the literal meaning of *psychē* is ‘soul,’” or “the literal meaning of the preposition *en* is ‘in.’” Unfortunately, this meaning is often cemented in the student’s mind as the “real” meaning of the word. All others are derivative, somehow less precise and accurate. This is the fallacy of lexical concordance.

*The Fallacy of Syntactical Correspondence*

In addition to seeking one-to-one concordance of words, formal equivalence also seeks syntactical correspondence between the source and receptor languages. As with lexical concordance, this is problematic because languages differ, often radically, in their grammar and syntax.

Translations that claim to be literal are in fact very dynamic. Take for example the ESV, a recent revision of the RSV, which claims in its preface to be an “essentially literal translation.” Compare the Greek original (transliterated) with the ESV in Heb 1:1:

Greek (UBS 4th ed.) *Poumerō s kai polutropōs palai ho theos lalēsas tois patrasin en tois prophētais.*

ESV Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,
Lexically, of course, the ESV has changed all of the words, seeking English lexemes that approximate the meaning of the Greek. Grammatically, the ESV has radically altered the verse, rearranging the word order and changing five of the seven main grammatical forms. Two adverbs (πολυτροπός Kai πολυτροπός) were changed into prepositional phrases (“at many times and in many ways”); another adverb (παλαι) was changed into an English idiom (“long ago”); a dative noun (τοις πατρασιν) into a prepositional phrase (“to our fathers”); a definite article (τοις) into a possessive adjective (“our”), and a participle (λαῆσας) into a finite verb (“spoke”). The only grammatical forms that remain unchanged are the noun “God” (ho theos) and the prepositional phrase “by the prophets” (en tois prophētai). Even these, however, were interpreted and altered. The noun in Greek has an article (“the God”), which the ESV has dropped. The prepositional phrase en tois prophētai required interpretation, since the Greek could mean “in the prophets,” “by the prophets,” “among the prophets,” “with the prophets,” etc. The ESV has also changed the structure of the whole, turning what in Greek is a subordinate participial phrase into an independent clause. This translation can hardly be called “essentially literal” if every grammatical form is changed!

None of this is meant to be critical of the ESV. All of it was necessary. The point is that the translators first interpreted and then modified and restructured every word and phrase to express the same meaning in English. An “essentially literal” translation—either lexically or syntactically—is a myth. It is ultimately irrelevant whether an adverb is replaced by a prepositional phrase or a participle replaced by a verb. The question that matters is, “Is the meaning reproduced?” As a method, translators may choose to follow the grammatical forms inasmuch as possible. This often works, but in every case, formal syntactical correspondence must be subordinated to functional correspondence.

In light of the significant differences between form and meaning, the ESV sounds oddly contradictory when in its preface it claims that, “As an essentially literal translation... the ESV seeks to carry over every possible nuance of meaning in the original words of Scripture into our own language.” 40 We might cynically ask which they are trying to do, produce an “essentially literal translation” or “carry over every possible nuance of meaning”? Thousands of examples could be marshaled to show that these two goals—which the ESV treats as one and the same—are in almost constant tension.

Some Bible versions seem to consider it a virtue to provide as little syntactical interpretation as possible, leaving readers to wrestle with the
differences between Greek and English grammar. Yet who is better able to deal with the idiosyncrasies of Greek grammar, translators with years of experience reading and interpreting Koine Greek, or an English reader who has never even seen a Greek sentence?

There is a common cliché that functional-equivalent versions are for beginning Bible students while more advanced students will move up to more literal versions. I would like to turn this on its head and say that more advanced students—those in their second year of Greek or beyond—will find functional-equivalent versions far more useful. Formal equivalent versions are indeed helpful for those with only a rudimentary knowledge of Greek, since they reveal the structure of the text in a transparent manner. More advanced students do not need these, since they can see the structure by looking at the Greek text! Advanced language students benefit from functional-equivalent versions because these operate at the level of intermediate Greek, showing the syntactical conclusions reached by translator-scholars.

Let me illustrate this from my own teaching experience. Each year I teach both beginning and intermediate Greek. I jokingly tell my beginning students that I will repeatedly lie to them about the meaning of words and syntactical relationships. For example, I teach them that Greek sárxi means “flesh” and that the genitive should be translated with a NOUN + “of” + NOUN construction, as in “the Word of God.” Neither of these statements is accurate, since sárxi has a semantic range far broader than the English lexeme “flesh,” and since the genitive has a host of functions, many of which should not be translated NOUN + “of” + NOUN. Things must be simplified for beginning students. These students love literal versions like the NASB that translate using the simplified expressions they are being taught. Literal versions contain the “answers” to their first year Greek exercises. I encourage my students to translate literally at this early stage so that I know that they are recognizing Greek forms like genitives and infinitives.

When we move to intermediate Greek, however, our focus becomes syntax—the functional relationships between words. I teach my students that infinitives can express a variety of adverbial (purpose, result, time, cause, means, etc.) or substantival functions (subject, direct object, indirect discourse, etc.). In many cases, to translate infinitives literally as “to” + VERB is to mistranslate them. At this point in their study, literal versions are of little
value. Students can see the formal structure of the Greek simply by looking at the Greek text. What they need are translations that wrestle with the meaning—the syntactical relationships between words. I often keep my Bible software open on my laptop in front of me with ten or more English versions open to our passage. When we come to a difficult syntactical construction, we wrestle with its meaning and then look at the various functional-equivalent versions to see how teams of translator-scholars have interpreted the Greek syntax. While formal-equivalent versions are a helpful “cheat sheet” or crib notes for beginning Greek students, functionally equivalent versions finish the task of translation by interpreting Greek phrases and clauses for English readers. Do they ever get that meaning wrong? Of course. This is the danger of all translation, but formal-equivalent translations do not necessarily get it right. When they do get it right, it is not because they have stayed “literal,” but because they have accurately reproduced the meaning—not just the form—of the Greek.

Conclusion

In summary, while there are important cautions related to functional equivalence, there are intrinsic defects in formal equivalence as a philosophy of translation. This is because the goal of translation is to communicate the meaning of a text in the source language for readers of the receptor language. Languages differ not only in their lexical stock (words and their meanings), but also in syntactical functions, in the meaning of idioms, and in collocational relationships. Attempting to achieve lexical concordance (word-for-word reproduction) or syntactical correspondence (formally reproducing grammatical forms, idioms and collocations) inevitably results in changed meanings, awkward language, and/or obscurity. While formal equivalent Bible versions function as useful tools for beginning language students for identifying formal features of the Greek or Hebrew text, as a philosophy of translation formal equivalence is fundamentally flawed.
1 This is a significantly revised version of a paper originally published as “Form, Function, and the ‘Literal Meaning’ Fallacy in English Bible Translation,” in The Bible Translator 56 (2005): 153–68. That article, in turn, was an abbreviated and revised version of a paper given at the Denver Seminary Biblical Studies Conference, “From Ancient Texts to Modern Versions: Issues in Bible Translation,” February 1, 2003, and at the November 2003 meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, GA. The present version is roughly half the length of the original, leaving off discussion of cautions and clarifications related to functional equivalence. The full paper may be obtained by contacting the author at m-strauss@bethel.edu.


4 See the introductions or prefaces to each of these versions for these terms. De Waard and Nida use the description “closest natural equivalent” in From One Language to Another, 41.


6 These figures are from the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) list of June 2011. The top ten in order are NIV, KJV, NKJV, NLT, ESV, NIV, HCSB, Reina Valera (Spanish), The Message, and NASB. They are based on actual sales in Christian retail stores through April 30, 2011.

7 Raymond Van Leeuwen, “We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation,” CT 45 (Oct. 22, 2001), 28-35; quote from p. 29. This call for a new version may have been related to Van Leeuwen’s role on the editorial team of the ESV (a revision of the RSV). Translators are always justifiably excited about their new version and hope it will fill an important niche. In fact, the ESV follows the same basic translation procedure as the RSV, NASB, NKJV, NRSV and other formal equivalent versions – and suffers from the same shortcomings, as the following pages will show.


See, for example, Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English. Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002); and Wayne Grudem, “Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God? Why Plenary Inspiration Favors ‘Essentially Literal’ Bible Translation,” in *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005). Ryken, professor of English at Wheaton College, identifies his work as a “wholehearted defense of essentially literal translation in the King James tradition” (p. 18). He decries dynamic equivalent translations for destroying the literary quality of the text, over-simplifying its meaning, removing important theological terminology, modernizing ancient contexts, and removing the majesty, mystery and ambiguity of the original. The book’s strength is its call for greater attention to the literary qualities of the Bible. Its weaknesses are a lack of linguistic sophistication with reference to Greek grammar and translation theory, and misrepresentation of the complexities of transferring meaning from one socio-linguistic context to another. He considers Eugene Nida’s influence on English Bible translation to be “on balance, negative, depriving current Bible readers of the Bible they need” (i.e., a literal one) (p. 14). Yet throughout the book, Ryken never seriously engages Nida’s theories and does not seem to comprehend fundamental linguistic issues at stake in the debate. See my review in *JETS* 40 (2003): 738-40.


Gutt uses the term “direct translation,” which means a translation that seeks to reproduce the communicative clues of the source language. But this is not the same as literal translation: “direct translation cannot be understood in terms of resemblance in actual linguistic properties for the simple reason that languages differ in those properties” (*Translation and Relevance*, 170). Kevin Smith, another advocate of Relevance Theory, echoes these sentiments: “Due to the structural differences between languages, it is not possible to reproduce the linguistic properties of one language in another” (K. Smith, “Translation as Secondary Communication. The Relevance Theory Perspective of Ernst-August Gutt,” *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 2 [2002]: 107-17; quote from p. 111).

Dynamic equivalence, a designation coined by Eugene Nida, was criticized as a theory for stressing the need to attain an “equivalent response” in the receptor audience. The term “functional equivalence” was coined in part to stress the need for equivalent meaning rather than equivalent response.

Critics of functional equivalence often claim the theory gives too much prominence to the receptor language. This is one of the chief claims of advocates of Relevance Theory, but there are many cautions in the literature against this. See next note.

See for example John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974); Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of

16 The exception, of course, is when a Bible version is intentionally produced for remedial readers or for children (e.g., the New International Readers’ Version [NIRV]). In this case, the audience assumptions and abilities (point “(2)” mentioned here), become a greater factor in the translation process.

17 Of course, tradeoff is often necessary, since retaining an allusion may sacrifice clarity, while producing clarity may mean losing a verbal allusion. Hard decisions must be made concerning which features of meaning and style should be preserved.

18 de Waard and Nida, From One Language to Another, 39, point out that most ambiguity is related to our ignorance of cultural and historical matters, rather than intentional ambiguity on the part of the author. In such cases, “The average reader is usually much less capable of making correct judgments about such alternative meanings than is the translator, who can make use of the best scholarly judgments on ambiguous passages. Accordingly, the translator should place in the text the best attested interpretation and provide in marginal notes the appropriate alternatives.”

19 Beekman and Callow, Translating the Word of God, 124-50, provide criteria for recognizing live and dead metaphors and guidelines for translating them.

20 See the longer version of this paper discussed in note 1 above; cf. Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). Also see especially the important cautions of D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence in Bible Translation,” Evangelical Review of Theology 9 (1985): 200-13, now revised and expanded in “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation – and Other Limits Too” (see note 9).

21 These points are taken from Mark L. Strauss, Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation & Gender Accuracy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 83, and developed in more detail in the longer version of this article (see note 1).

22 The exception is onomatopoeia, where a word (like “whoosh!”) is intended to sound like its meaning. But even onomatopoeia differs dramatically between languages: only in English does a dog say “ruff, ruff” and a cat “meow”!


24 Ibid., 79, and passim.

25 Ibid., 85-87.

26 Ibid., 85.

27 Van Leeuwen, “We Really Do Need,” 30. Again: “The problem with FE [functional equivalence] (i.e., most modern translations) is that they prevent the reader from inferring biblical meaning because they change what the Bible said.”
28 Ibid., 33.

29 “Literal” means something very different (but equally ambiguous!) in hermeneutical discussion.

30 Two English versions that have attempted systematic lexical concordance are the *Concordant Literal New Testament*, produced by A. E. Knoch in 1926, and Robert Young’s, *Young’s Literal Translation*, first published in 1862. Both argued that since every word of God was inspired, a translation should keep as close as possible to the original, seeking one-to-one correspondence between Hebrew and Greek words and English ones. The results are, at best, awkward and obscure, and at worst, complete gibberish.

31 The exception is puns and intentional plays on words.

32 James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218. A Bible version that errs greatly in this regard is the Amplified Bible, often introducing many senses of each lexeme into a particular context.

33 Beekman and Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, 75.

34 In English you “make” an oath; in Greek you normally “swear” (ομπνω) an oath.

35 This example is from Fee and Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation*, 56.

36 To its credit, the ESV sometimes does introduce a Greek term in the margin.

37 The NET translators explain in their preface that the designations “Heb,” “Aram,” or “Grk” “give a translation that approximates formal equivalence to the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text.” (Preface to the NET). While this solves the first problem, it does not solve the second, which is the misguided claim that “flesh” is somehow closer to the Greek than “human being.” Is there a solution to this? I would suggest that the NET translators reproduce Greek transliterations in the margin and then include a glossary of explanations for these complex lexical units.

38 Sometimes the ESV follows this procedure, but inconsistently. In Rom 1:1 the footnote first offers an alternative, then reproduces the error: “Or slave, Greek bondservant.”


40 Preface to the ESV, viii.

The King James Version Then and Now

By Philip C. Stine

ABSTRACT

For four hundred years, the King James Bible has been the principal Bible for millions of English-speaking Christians. Vocabulary and spelling have changed so that readers frequently misunderstand this Bible and find it difficult to read. Yet the language still finds its way into our daily speech and public discourse.

The translation was a major influence on the standardization of the English language precisely because the translators were not attempting to create significant literature. Their aim was to produce a Bible that a largely illiterate audience could understand when it was read aloud.

Its origins are found in the history and politics of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. When the English church broke with Rome, English Bibles were needed to confirm that rupture. However, the struggles first between Roman Catholics and Protestants, and then between the establishment Anglicans and Puritans, led to the situation by 1600 where the Geneva Bible was favored by the Puritans, but the Bible authorized for use in all the churches was the Bishops’ Bible. When James I came to the English throne in 1603, the Puritans asked for more reform and authorization of the Geneva Bible. James ordered instead a new translation, and established a process and set of principles to ensure it was free of Calvinist doctrine and would support the monarchy and the established church. The Bible included the Apocrypha, which was normally included in printings until 1826.

The Bible was published in 1611 in two versions. It is not known which was first. Different printers introduced numerous misprints and corrections over the years. Even today there are several different versions of the King James Bible published in America. There is no such thing as an original, flawless King James Bible.

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Every English speaker has had some contact with this 400-year-old translation and been influenced by it. For example, all speakers use or are familiar with idioms such as “my brother’s keeper” from Genesis 4; “a good old age” from Genesis 15; “the apple of his eye” from Deuteronomy 32; “the straight and narrow” from Matthew 7; and “the patience of Job” from James 5. One scholar demonstrates that at least 257 such phrases from the King James Bible are commonly used. Music lovers (and others) who have attended a performance of Handel’s Messiah have heard long passages of text based on this translation. The aria “I know that my redeemer liveth” is from Job 19:25; the tenor piece “Comfort ye” is from Isaiah 40. From TV quiz shows to newspaper articles, when the Bible is quoted, it is inevitably the King James Version that is cited.

The King James Bible and the English Language

Modern English speakers are aware that there are many dialects, accents, and variations in the language, yet find these mutually intelligible for the most part and recognize them as forms of English. It is even possible to talk about “standard English,” a form that may be taught in schools throughout the English-speaking world. But that has not always been the case. In sixteenth century England, three languages were commonly spoken. The church and academia spoke Latin; many in the aristocracy still used French; other people used various Englishes. But as the use of Latin faded in the late 1500s, the need arose for some sort of standardization of language to use in commerce, government, and diplomacy. The French and the Italians had established academies for this purpose, but this did not happen in England. Rather, most textbooks on the history of English agree that the two most important influences on the standardization of English were the works of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and the King James Bible of 1611.

The two most important influences on the standardization of English were the works of William Shakespeare and the King James Bible.

The unique feature of both of these enduring bodies of work is that they were meant to be heard. Shakespeare’s plays and poems were specifically written to be performed and heard, and the translators of the King James Bible also envisioned oral readings of their translation within the context of public worship. Both materials addressed
audiences that were appreciators of their own language, but who were largely illiterate.

Shakespeare’s influence was with new vocabulary, the thousands of new words and idioms he introduced such as “accommodation,” “assassination,” “barefaced,” “countless,” “laughable,” “premeditated,” “submerged,” “courtship” and “obscene.” “To be or not to be” was great poetry, but it did not influence the standardization of the language. The new words did.

The influence of the King James Bible came from the use of simple, understandable language that was not intended to be literature. The translators, as with all English academics and professors of that era, spoke and used Latin much more than English. Miles Smith, who wrote the Preface to the translation, said they had learned Latin from the cradle. John Overall, another of the translators, complained that he had spoken Latin so long it was troublesome to speak English in continued oration. Records of the libraries of the translators would indicate little or no interest in literature or drama. John Reynolds, one of the translators, wrote a book with the title in part “The Overthrow of Stage Plays . . . wherein is manifestly proved, that it is not only unlawful to be an actor, but a beholder of those vanities” (1599). In every likelihood, these learned men never saw a play by Shakespeare. Theology, scholarship, and the classics dominated their world. They probably would be astonished to discover that they lived in a great age of English literature.4

So how did the King James Bible come to influence the standardization of English? There are two reasons. First, the translators were deliberately not trying to create a work of literature. They simply wanted a text that would be easily understood by ordinary people when it was read aloud. This translation was not meant to be read silently for personal meditation. It was a preacher’s Bible, a Bible meant to be read aloud to congregations.

The second reason is that the translation looked backwards. The use of older forms made the translation sound familiar, something with which people were comfortable. For example, the translation used old word orders that had already fallen out of use. “Follow thou me,” “speak ye unto” and “things eternal” fall into this category. Those “-eth” endings for third person singular (he giveth) were largely by then out of use to be replaced by “-s” (he gives). One of the most interesting cases relates to the second person pronouns. By 1611, “thou/thine/thee,” originally singular forms, had already been replaced by “you/your/yours” for both singular and plural. The translators followed the old
pattern that English had adopted from French in using the *thou* forms only for inferiors or intimates, so that in this translation using these forms to address God in prayer was a mark of intimacy or great familiarity, unlike the understanding of many Christians today who have reversed the usage by thinking of these terms as more respectful.

The language was so clear that readers simply began thinking of the Bible as having been written in English. The King James Bible became “the Bible.” The idea of inspiration, traditionally applied to the biblical texts in their original languages, now came to be applied to the King James Bible itself.

**Politics and the Need for a New Translation**

The origins of this influential translation are found in the history and politics of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Since the fourth century, the church had used the Latin Vulgate translation prepared by Saint Jerome. As the general population could not read Latin, the clergy controlled the interpretation of the Bible. During the 1300s, John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384) and his itinerant followers called Lollards opposed many of the teachings of the church that he thought were opposed to the Bible. Wycliffe prepared a translation of the Bible into English, based on the Vulgate. Wycliffe’s translation distressed church authorities, who, forty years after his death, ordered his bones dug up, crushed, and scattered in a river.

William Tyndale (1494-1536) was similarly motivated. His 1526 English translation, based on Greek and Hebrew rather than Latin, had the advantage of being printed on the newly invented printing press, thereby giving it much wider circulation than Wycliffe’s. The translation was published in several places in Europe. Tyndale suffered the church’s persecution and had to flee to Europe while copies of the translation were smuggled into Scotland and England. Declared a heretic in 1529 by Cardinal Wolsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, Tyndale was eventually arrested in Antwerp, kept in prison at Vilvoorde outside Brussels, tried and found guilty of heresy, strangled to death, and then burned at the stake in 1536.

But the battle for English Bibles was won. After Parliament officially broke away from Rome, Henry VIII realized that using English Bibles would help with the establishment of an English church. In 1538 he authorized Thomas Cranmer, the new Archbishop of Canterbury (Wolsey fell from favor when he would not help the king obtain Henry VIII realized that using English Bibles would help with the establishment of an English church.
a divorce) to have a translation prepared to be read in all churches. Cranmer turned the task over to Thomas Cromwell who then supervised Myles Coverdale in carrying out the work. Cromwell had been an associate of Tyndale and had finished the work on his Bible. Thus, the Bible he prepared contained a great deal of material from Tyndale’s translation, with Vulgate material interpolated. This Bible was published in 1539. Sometimes called the “Great Bible” because of the size of the pages, it was also called the “Chained Bible” since the intent was to have a copy in every church chained to a lectern so it could not be stolen.

Queen Mary I, known as “Bloody Mary,” came to the throne in 1553. A Roman Catholic, she began to persecute and execute Protestant leaders including Cranmer who was burned at the stake in Oxford in 1555. A number of other scholars and leaders, however, fled to Geneva, Switzerland, where they came under the influence of the Reformer John Calvin. They began to prepare an English translation that reflected Calvinist theology both in the text and notes. The New Testament of this “Geneva Bible” was published in 1560; and the whole Bible, in 1576. Widely distributed in England, this was the Bible used by Shakespeare, Bunyan, Milton, and Donne.

Dissatisfied with the theology of this translation but recognizing that the Great Bible was itself deficient in some ways, a number of bishops hastily prepared a new version that was published in 1568. Known as the “Bishops’ Bible,” it was the one authorized to be used in the churches.

The English reformers who had been exiled in Geneva and who returned to England after Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 felt that the English reformation had not gone far enough, that it was still too Catholic. They were dismayed that the Anglican Church retained too many rituals and ceremonies, as well as customs such as priests wearing surplices and the prominence given to the emblem of the cross. Consequently, they were known as Puritans.

In her forty-three years as monarch, Elizabeth I was able to keep an uneasy peace between the Puritans and the established Anglicans. When she died in 1603, James VI of Scotland ascended to the English throne as James I. Presbyterians had reared James, which led the Puritans to hope that there would now be a chance for further reform of the church in England. A number of them met him on his way to London and presented him with the Millenary Petition, so-called because it had reportedly been signed by a thousand clergy. This document stated that the time had come for change in the church.
The Puritans had misjudged James. He was a strong believer in the divine right of kings, and strongly favored a church establishment that would support the monarchy. To respond to their petition, he called for a conference in early 1604 at Hampton Court, a few miles west of London. The first day of the conference, James met with a select group of advisors and church leaders, but excluded the Puritans. The second day, four Puritans were called in to the meeting. The king rejected most of their requests. In the hope that perhaps James would allow the Geneva Bible to replace the Bishops’ Bible, the Puritan John Reynolds asked if there could not be a new translation in the churches.

The problem was that James detested the Geneva Bible. For one thing, the notes tended to support a separatist and non-establishment doctrine. For example, Exod 1:19 tells how the Hebrew midwives lied to Pharaoh, and the note suggests that disobedience of Pharaoh was lawful. This infuriated James who could not accept the notion of any lie to a monarch being acceptable. He was also concerned with the translation of ecclesiastical words. He insisted that *ecclesia* should be rendered as “church,” not “congregation” as in the Geneva Bible, and *presbyteros* should be “priest,” not “elder.” These terms were crucial to the English Reformation. An “elder” would not have any ancient priestly significance, that is, would not necessarily be the means of passing on God’s grace to humankind. Believing in the priesthood of all believers, as most of the reformers including the Puritans did, meant for them that there was no need for bishops and archbishops. Similarly, a “congregation” had no need for the elaborate and expensive structures of the established church. “Washing” did not have the same sacramental importance of “baptism.”

As a result, rather than agreeing to authorize the Geneva Bible for public worship, James seized on Reynolds’ request and ordered a new translation. To insure that the translation would be free of the kinds of problems he saw in the Geneva Bible, James and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Richard Bancroft, developed a procedural system and fifteen specific instructions or rules to follow. They established six committees they called “companies,” each with up to nine members. The Old Testament was divided among three companies, the New Testament between two, and the sixth company was assigned the Apocrypha.

Many modern readers may be surprised to find that the King James Bible included the Apocrypha. Over the years, some publishers dropped it to save on printing costs, but it was generally included in the Bible until 1826 when the British and Foreign Bible Society yielded to protests from a number of
conservative clergy, particularly in Scotland, and ceased printing it. Other publishers soon followed suit.

All members of a company translated the same material, then met together to compare their versions and prepare a draft to circulate to the other companies. These would return their comments to the drafters, who would then prepare a revised draft that was checked by a committee of three and given a final check by Myles Smith and Thomas Bilson. This procedure guaranteed that the translation conformed to the standards and goals that James and Bancroft had set out.

This organization and procedure was a marked development in the history of Bible translation. Previously, individuals carried out all the work. Even if several individuals translated different books of a Bible, as in the case of both Wycliffe and Tyndale, it was still a matter of individuals working. There was no committee structure, no review process, and no principles of translation laid out for all the work. Perhaps it was no accident that James’ committees were called “companies,” as the process was a very good business model.

The companies were not asked to prepare a completely new translation, but rather to revise the Bishops’ Bible since it was the only Bible authorized for reading in church. In the end, only about 8% of the King James Bible comes from the Bishops’ Bible. The translators based their work on the Hebrew and Greek texts, and referred to other translations that were available. As much as 75% of their work comes from the Tyndale translation, but because the King James translators were concerned with how their translation sounded, it differs markedly from Tyndale in style. Read this familiar passage aloud:

I Cor 13:11-13:

Tyndale: When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I imagined as a child. But as soon as I was a man, I put away childishness. Now we see in a glass even in a dark speaking: but then shall we see face to face. Now I know imperfectly: but then shall I know even as I am known. Now abideth faith, hope, and love, even these three: but the chief of these is love:

King James Bible: When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.
What is involved here is not just that we are more familiar with the King James Bible; the rhythm and flow is important. It sounds better.

**Printing Revisions and Errors**

The translation work began in the fall of 1604 and by 1610 was largely finished. Smith and Bilson turned the materials over to Robert Barker, the king’s printer, for typesetting and printing. It is not known whether they gave Barker manuscripts or a marked-up copy of the Bishops’ Bible. What was said to be a “manuscript copy” of the Bible was sold twice in the 1600s, once to Cambridge University Press and once to a firm of London printers. But this has now disappeared.

Because the translation had been ordered as a revision of the Bishops’ Bible, Stationer’s Hall, the body that kept records of new publications including dates and number printed, did not keep any record of this Bible when it was published in 1611.

Readers who compare various King James Bibles available in America from different publishers may be surprised to find that they are not all the same. The Bible circulates in at least five different categories of editions, all with the same general content, but none completely identical with the others in a number of technical details. In addition, they differ in the pronunciation systems, spelling of proper nouns, verse style versus paragraph formatting, page and chapter headings, reference systems, printing the words of Jesus in red, and statements at the end of some Epistles.

Even in 1611 there were different versions. The printer Barker issued the Bible in 1611 in two separate editions, leaving bibliographers guessing which was the first. To add to the confusion, some sheets of one edition were bound with sheets of another in some copies. The most striking difference is that in Ruth 3:15 one edition had “he went into the citie,” and the other “she went.” This has given rise to the names “The Great He Bible” and “The Great She Bible.” Many contemporary scholars think that the “He” Bible was first and that “She” was a correction. Most current editions of the King James Bible therefore have “she,” but the Revised and the American Revised Versions read “he.” Also, the “She” Bible had “good pearls” at Matt 13:45, but the “He” Bible had “goodly.” There were numerous other differences. One scholar has listed 658. Even the title pages differed in the two editions.
The explanation for how these differences came about can be found in the printing methods of that day. Printers in 1611 had a limited supply of type. The custom was to set four pages, print as many copies as were needed for an edition, and then break down the type for further use. It was impossible to save what was set. Nor could plates be stored. As a result, despite every precaution, because of human fallibility, every edition would have some printing errors. Often these would be discovered and corrected in the next printing, but of course this printing would contain new errors. Further, sheets of the same pages from different printings could easily become intermingled.

Misprints abounded in every printing. The most consequential was in an edition of 1631 where by accident the compositors dropped the word “not” from Exod 20:14, so that it read, “Thou shalt commit adultery.” This edition became known as the “Wicked Bible.” The blunder was spread in a number of copies. The king, Charles I, and the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, George Abbot, were outraged that the Bible contained such a flagrant mistake. Robert Barker and Martin Lucas, the publishers, were summoned to the Star Chamber, an English court of law at the Palace of Westminster, where they were fined £300 and had their printer’s license taken away. The majority of the Wicked Bible copies were cancelled and burned, with only eleven copies surviving today.

As a result of all these issues, readers can rightfully ask, “What was the original King James Bible?” or even, “Is there such a thing as an original King James Bible?” Quite simply, there is no such thing as a single, uniform, consistent, and flawless form of an original King James Bible. Even in 1611, there were two editions, and as time passed, the variations among the different editions continued to multiply. The lack of records available for study and the nature of publishing in the early seventeenth century make it impossible to determine fully that the translators’ preferences were ever fulfilled.

**Eventual Acceptance**

Although the King James Bible is referred to as the Authorized Version, especially in the United Kingdom, there is no evidence that it ever received any final written authorization from the bishops, the Privy Council, or the king. Of course, the king had authorized that the translation be undertaken, but he does not seem to have given any final official approval to the translation, nor to its publication. The title page includes the words, “Appointed to be read in churches,” but what this meant in English at that time was that the work was laid out in a way suitable for public reading in churches. Reading
this Bible aloud in churches over time led to its wide acceptance and popularity far longer than the translators anticipated. After the civil wars in England in the mid-seventeenth century, when the Puritans were finally ousted and the monarchy re-established in 1660, a Bible that supported monarchy assumed its role as the establishment Bible.

Acceptance in America was not immediate. When a group of Puritans left England on the Mayflower in 1621, they carried three copies of the Geneva Bible with them. Calvinist Christianity of that era put primacy on a sovereign and vengeful God, and constantly doubted the validity of worldly governments. By emphasizing the differences between those who were chosen to be saved and the lost who would surely perish, adherents of this doctrine had little motivation for establishing strong and stable governments or founding a nation. The Geneva Bible notes and translation fueled these separatist inclinations of the American Pilgrim Fathers. But as the country grew and spread, the northern and southern colonies lost some of their distinctiveness. Consequently, political processes developed and matured, and the need for a “separatist gospel” declined. In time, a need for a Bible that supported nation building became more pronounced, and by 1700 the “establishment” Bible, the King James Version, became the Bible of America.

The Geneva Bible was never printed in America. The first English Bible printed in America was a King James Bible printed by Robert Aitken in 1782. Aitken was the official printer for the Journals of Congress of the U.S. Congress. King James Bibles were still published only by royal authority in England, making their availability in America difficult and expensive. At Aitken’s request, Congress gave unanimous approval for the printing of this Bible, the only occasion of Congress authorizing the printing of a Bible.

Oratory

In part because the translation was deliberately aural, the King James Bible has had a strong influence on public speakers. Especially in North American oratory, its language continues to resonate. This is particularly evident in the African American community. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, not only quoted regularly from this translation, but on occasions even used features such as the “-eth” endings in his own speech. Even
superficial study of the rhetoric of Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt reveals real resonance with the King James Bible.

Abraham Lincoln was hesitant to associate himself with any organized church, but he read this Bible regularly and he quoted from it extensively. Furthermore, he expected his audience to recognize the source of the quotations and allusions. The address delivered by Abraham Lincoln in 1865 at his second inauguration is an example. The words “wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces” are an allusion to the Fall of Man in Gen 3:19. Lincoln’s phrase, “but let us judge not, that we be not judged,” alludes to Matt 7:1, which in the King James Version reads, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”

Lincoln quotes another of the sayings of Jesus: “Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.” The language comes from Matt 18:7; a similar discourse appears in Luke 17:1. The quotation “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” is from Ps 19:9 in the King James Bible.

One of Lincoln’s best known speeches is known by a quote from the King James Bible. In 1858 when he accepted the Republican nomination as candidate for the U. S. Senate, in his introductory remarks he paraphrased Matt 12:25 and said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

**Language Change**

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the King James Bible underwent a number of revisions, for example the Revised Standard Version of 1952. One reason for these was that language, especially vocabulary, had changed significantly. Although grammar and usage evolve over time, it is in the vocabulary that changes are most notable. In the King James Bible, the word “advertise” simply means “to tell,” “allege” means “prove,” and “conversation” means “behavior.” “Take thought” in 1611 meant “be anxious and “meat” was a general term for “food.” “Anon” and the expression “by and by” are translations of *euthus*, “immediately” in modern English. In 1611 “prevent” meant “come before,” so that Ps 88:13 “in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee,” confusing at best today, means “in the morning shall my prayer come before thee.” A contemporary reader faced with several hundred vocabulary items like this can easily misunderstand the text, or worse, simply lay the book aside as too difficult.

One of the differences among contemporary editions is the surprising number of variants in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. These differences exist because English spelling had not been standardized by 1611.
Publishers often spelled a word several different ways even in the same document, depending on the need for space or how a particular typesetter preferred to write a word. A number of spelling guides appeared in the middle of the eighteenth century, but two dictionaries stand out as significant corrections to the problem. In England, Samuel Johnson released his dictionary in 1755. Johnson defined more than 40,000 words and in the words of his biographer James Boswell, “conferred stability” on the language—and at least with respect to spelling this seems to be so. In America, Noah Webster’s An American Dictionary of the English Language, which he published in 1828, tried to demonstrate that American English was different from British English and had its own standards. To a large degree, these efforts both achieved these goals and are landmarks in the standardization of spelling of the English language.

But different publishers have “corrected” or standardized the King James Bible spelling to different degrees and in different ways. For example, Oxford and Cambridge University Presses and some American publishers, including Thomas Nelson, continue to use the capitalization of “Cherubims” that the 1611 had. In that version, it was capitalized in Gen 3:24, but not elsewhere. They also retain the final “s” for plurals of words that are already plural in Hebrew. Examples are “Cherubims,” “seraphims,” “Nethinims,” “Emims,” and “Cherethims.” Other publishers have dropped this unnecessary “s.”

The Cambridge and Oxford editions also spell many words differently from the 1611 Bible, such as the more contemporary “chestnut” instead of “chesnut” in Gen 30:37 and Ezek 31:8; “lunatic” for “lunatick” in Matt 4:24; “crookbacked” for “crookbackt” in Lev 21:20; and “plaster” for “plaister” in Lev 14:42. Some versions, for example those of the American Bible Society, Oxford University Press, and Thomas Nelson, capitalize “spirit” in Gen 1:2 and 2 Kgs 2:16, whereas many others, including Cambridge University Press, do not.

The 1611 Bible was very inconsistent in the use of the indefinite article “an” before the numeral “one,” the nouns “harlot,” “Hebrew,” “husband” and “hill,” and the adjectives “high” and “holy.” Oxford, Cambridge and Thomas Nelson keep the inconsistencies except, contrary to the King James Bible, these all have “an hill” at Isa 30:17, and “an harlot” at Joel 3:3. Other editions conform to modern usage. The differences are slight, but they are examples of just some of the ways the different editions available today differ.

**Democracy**

Before the establishment of printing in Western Europe, most people did not know what the Bible actually said. The Bible was expensive, not readily
available, and in Latin. Once it was translated and printed in the languages of Europe, reformation in the church was inevitable. People could obtain the Bible easily, read it with comprehension, and decide for themselves what it meant. Historians point out that in England, for example, free discussion of the authority of the church and state helped bring about constitutional changes, leading to a monarchy with very limited rights and powers. In America the climate of free and open discussion reached even greater heights and was one factor that led to the American colonial revolt. The Bible in English, specifically the King James Version, allowed and even gave authority to people to think for themselves. Quite possibly democracy as we know it would not have come about in Western Europe and North America without this. G. K. Chesterton (1874 – 1936), the Roman Catholic writer, once said of the English that they “did not really drive away the American colonists, nor were they driven. The [Americans] were led on by a light that went before.”8 That light was the King James Bible. Readers saw in the Bible that each person was equally important and sacred, each one made in the image of God. In short, to quote Benson Bobrick, “Why is the King James Version of the Bible important? Because in the end, it sanctioned the right and capacity of people to think for themselves.”9

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1 Material for this article draws extensively from Philip Stine, 400 Years on the Best-Seller List (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, forthcoming).

2 David Crystal, Begat: the King James Bible & the English Language (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 258.

3 See, for example, David Crystal, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 62.

4 These examples are from David Norton, “The KJV at 400: Assessing its Genius as Bible Translation and its Literary Influence” (paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, November 2010).

5 It does not seem that the full complement of fifty-four was ever filled. The available lists of translators name either forty-seven or fifty-one.

6 Smith, a well-respected biblical scholar, served on one of the Old Testament companies and wrote the preface to the King James Bible. Bilson was the Bishop of
Winchester, but had previously been a judge and also a member of the Privy Council that advised the king.


9 Bobrick, “The Legacy of the King James Bible,” 21.
Early Bibles in Pictures:

Celebrating 400 Years of the King James Bible
Timeline, Commentary, Pictures*

* By Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., Senior Scholar and Professor of Old Testament at Campbellsville University, and Business Manager for Review & Expositor, Louisville, Kentucky.
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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
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<td>1488</td>
<td>Soncino Hebrew Bible</td>
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<td>Martin Luther New Testament</td>
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<td>William Tyndale New Testament</td>
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Commentary on Photographs

Fig. 1. The Torah Scroll, or Sefer Torah, is a typical Hebrew scroll used in Jewish worship from Old Testament times. Jeremiah 36 describes the writing of such a scroll (and its destruction!). This particular scroll is over 300 years old and contains the entire Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy).

Fig. 2. From the fourth century until the Reformation most Christians in Europe knew the Bible primarily from the Latin, especially Jerome's Vulgate. Until the invention of the printing press in 1455, all copies of the Bible, or portions of the Bible, were hand-copied. This page, containing Numbers 25-26 in Latin, was produced in Paris in 1247.

Fig. 3. Johann Gutenberg is credited with the invention of the printing press with movable type. While other pamphlets and small works were probably printed earlier, the first major book printed by Gutenberg was the Bible in Latin and was completed in 1455. This sheet is a photograph of a replica page of the beginning of the Gospel of John from the first printed Bible, the 42 line Bible. The left column starts with an introduction to the Gospel. The Gospel of John itself begins in the middle of the right column:

“In principio erat verbum . . . .”
“In the beginning was the word . . . .”

Fig. 4. William Tyndale translated the Bible into English, using Hebrew and Greek as well as the Latin Vulgate. At that time Canon Law in England forbade any translation other than the Vulgate unless the translation was approved by the established church. Tyndale did most of his translation in Germany, printing the complete New Testament in 1526 in Worms, Germany. Only two copies of this printing are known, one is in St. Paul's Cathedral, the other was in Bristol Baptist College until 1994 when it was purchased by the British Library. This page of Matthew 1 is from a facsimile made from the Bristol Baptist College copy.* Tyndale revised his New Testament several times and completed a translation of the Pentateuch and Psalms before he was martyred in 1536.
Fig. 5. Myles Coverdale worked with Tyndale in his later years. Not the scholar of biblical languages Tyndale was, Coverdale had to rely on the Latin Vulgate and Luther’s German translation for his work. But he produced a much more readable, smooth English translation than Tyndale. Coverdale’s Bible became the first complete Bible printed in English; it was printed in Antwerp in 1535. The 1537 edition of his Bible is shown here.

Fig. 6. In 1538, Coverdale had a Latin-English diglot published in France to show that the English translation did not contradict the Vulgate. This page has Colossians 1.

Figs. 7A and 7B. After the death of Tyndale, John Rogers revised the New Testament of Tyndale and incorporated Tyndale’s partial Old Testament into his own translation. He printed it under the pseudonym Thomas Matthew in 1537, fearing persecution for producing an English translation. Accused of heresy, Rogers became the first martyr under Mary I, “Bloody Mary,” in 1555. This edition of the Thomas Matthew Bible was printed in 1549.

Fig. 8. This page shows Ps 91:5 from the 1549 edition of the Thomas Matthew Bible, also called the “Bugge Bible.” The verse reads: “so that thou shalt not need to be afraid for any bugges by nyghte, nor for the arowe that flyeth by daye.”

Fig. 9. Coverdale continued his translation and revision work with the “Great Bible,” first published in 1539. It was a revision of his earlier work, and included many of the readings from the Thomas Matthew Bible. The name “Great Bible” denoted the large size of the Bible, 16”x11.”. The intention was to have a copy of the Great Bible in every church in England. This copy of the Great Bible was printed in 1541.

Fig. 10. This page of the 1541 Great Bible contains Genesis 3 and includes two woodcuts depicting the temptation of Adam and Eve and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden.
Fig. 11A and B. Translators of the Bible into English did have access to some original language (Greek and Hebrew) biblical texts. The Sioncino Hebrew Bible was published in Italy in 1488 and Sebastian Munster completed a Hebrew Bible with the Latin text in 1534. Desiderius Erasmus published a Greek New Testament in 1516. Robert Stephanus printed a popular Greek New Testament, based largely on Erasmus’ edition, in Paris from 1546 to 1550. Stephanus’ Greek New Testament was used by the translators of the Geneva Bible. His son, Robert Stephanus, Jr., continued printing the Greek New Testament after his father fled to Geneva in 1550. This copy was printed in 1569 in Paris by Robert Stephanus, Jr.

Fig. 12. A number of English Protestants fled from persecution in England to Geneva Switzerland. William Whittingham became the primary translator of a new Bible known as the Geneva Bible. The New Testament was completed in 1557 and the entire Bible in 1560. The page shown is the New Testament title page of the 1560 edition. The Geneva Bible became extremely popular because of its smaller, more affordable size, its Roman type face, its verse divisions, and its marginal notes. It was the Bible of the Puritans, the Bible the Pilgrims brought to America.

Fig. 13A and B. The top photograph shows Genesis 3 from a 1599 printing of the Geneva Bible. The Geneva Bible is also known as the “Breeches” Bible from Gen 3:7: “… and they sewed figge tree leaves together and made themselves breeches.” The bottom photograph shows 1 Cor 13:4-13. The Geneva Bible uses “love” consistently in the passage, as did Tyndale’s translation.

Fig. 14. Theodore Beza of Geneva printed numerous editions of the Greek New Testament between 1565 and 1598. The text was primarily that of Robert Stephanus even though Beza had access to two Greek codices. Beza does refer to the codices in his notes on the text. Beza’s Greek New Testament was the primary Greek text used by the translators of the Bishops’ Bible and the King James Version. The page shown is from Beza’s Greek-Latin Diglot New Testament of 1565 (Beza’s first edition of a Greek New Testament) and shows Matthew 4:19-24.
Fig. 15. In 1563 a major revision of the Great Bible was begun. Since the translation was undertaken by leading bishops of the Church of England, it became known as the Bishops’ Bible. The translation was completed in 1568. The translation never had the popularity the Geneva Bible enjoyed. The main importance of the Bishops’ Bible is that it served as the primary text for an enormously successful revision—the King James Bible. The New Testament Title Page of a 1602 edition of the Bishops’ Bible is shown.

Fig. 16. In the 1568 edition of the Bishops’ Bible, the translators followed the Tyndale and Geneva Bible translation and used “love” in 1 Corinthians 13. Beginning, however, with the 1572 revision of the Bishop’s Bible, “love” is replaced with “charitie” taken from the Latin Vulgate caritas. The King James Bible followed the Bishops’ Bible translation of “charitie.”

Fig. 17. The proliferation of English translations of the Bible by Protestants-Reformers led to the need for an English translation reflecting and explaining Catholic doctrine. The New Testament was completed and printed in Rheims, France in 1582. The title page of the first edition is shown here.

Fig. 18. The Biblia Sacra is a triglot version printed in Hamburg, Germany in 1596. It contains four columns: German, two Latin versions, and Greek. The text shown is Luke 15:12-24, almost the complete parable of the Prodigal Son.

Fig. 19. The Rheims New Testament drew sharp criticism from English Protestants. In particular, William Fulke produced a parallel Bible with the Rheims New Testament and the Bishops’ Bible New Testament. In his notes, he argues against the Rheims translation, especially the technical theological terminology it uses. This page is from the 1601 edition of Fulke’s work printed by Robert Barker. The text has Mark 14:22-41, most of the Last Supper and Garden of Gethsemane narrative.

Fig. 20. The same Catholic scholars who produced the Rheims New Testament also produced an Old Testament translation. But due to financial constraints, the Old Testament was not published until 1609. It was printed at Douay, France. The title page of the first edition is shown here.
Fig. 21. King James I succeeded Elizabeth I as king of England in 1603. In 1607 he appointed fifty-four scholars to produce a new translation of the Bible in English to replace the Bishops’ Bible, which had never achieved widespread popularity, and to compete with the very popular, but for the king too anti-monarchy, Geneva Bible. The King James Bible was completed in 1611. Shown here is the Old Testament title page of the 1611 edition printed by Robert Barker in London.

Fig. 22. The King James Bible was printed by a number of different printers. The result was a number of variants in translation, and errors in printing. In addition, the spelling of the King James Bible was quite different from the spelling we usually read in our King James editions today. In this and the following photographs, we show the original texts with several variants and textual errors. Here are photographs of Ruth 3:15 from the “He” Bible and the “She” Bible. The variant is whether the text speaks that “he” (Boaz) or “she” (Ruth) went into the city. The Masoretic text has “he,” but at least forty Hebrew manuscripts have “she.” The Vulgate and Syriac have “she.” Modern English versions are split: “she” is found in current KJV, NAS, RSV, and JPS; “he” is found in NIV, NRSV, and TNIV.

Fig. 23. This photograph shows the Decalog (Ten Commandments) from Exodus 20 from the 1611 King James Bible. Note the spelling in the original edition.

Fig. 24A. This photograph shows the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew 6 from the 1611 King James Bible. Again note the spelling variants in this edition.

Fig. 24B. This photograph of Matthew 26:36 is from the “She” Bible. It shows the printing error that reads: “Then cometh Judas with them unto a place called Gethehmane, and saith unto them, Sit yee here while I goe and pray yonder.” The correct reading is “Then cometh Jesus . . . .” A previous owner of this Bible has marked through “Judas” and written “Jesus” above the line.
Acknowledgments and Photograph Credits:

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*Note: All reasonable efforts have been made, including assistance from British colleagues, to obtain permission from the original copyright holder for publication of the photograph in figure 4 of the Tyndale New Testament reprint published in collaboration with Bristol Baptist College in 1976, but without success. Apologies are offered of any unintentional infringement that may have occurred.
Fig. 1. Torah Scroll, Opened to Exodus 20, the Decalogue, in Left Column.
Fig. 2. Numbers 25-26, Latin Vulgate, Illuminated Manuscript, Paris, dated to 1247.
Fig. 3. Gutenberg 42 Line Bible, Latin, 1455. Beginning of the Gospel of John (Replica Page).
Fig. 4. Matthew 1, Tyndale New Testament, 1526, copy of Bible previously at Bristol Baptist College, Bristol, England, now in British Library.
Fig. 5A. Coverdale Bible, 1537.

Fig. 5B. Psalm 21 (our Psalm 23), Coverdale Bible.
CAPVT I.

and promis, as if both also amongst
yon, sence that it
and know the grace of God in the
truth, as we have learned it of a

Therefore we also, by the

that we are renews, and prays for you, and among that we may
be filled with the knowledge of our

wise, in all spiritual fulness and
understanding, that we may walk
with circumspection, ruling your

right hand, and grace be in the
knowledge of God, being strengthened
in all power, according to the might
of his grace in all patience and long

endurance, with God the Father, the

whom he hath made pre-eminent of the parts of the

enlargement of the saints in the

light, which hath been drawn out of
the power of darkness, and hath

translated us into the kingdom of his
beloved Son, by whom we have

redemption, a remission of sins,
which is also the fulness of the

God, the fulness of all creation,

for by him are all things made
both in heaven and earth, the

things in heaven and in earth, which
be thrones, dominions, principalities,

all things are created by him in him, he is before all, all
things in him, and he is above all, all
things.

And he is before all the

heavenly host (namely the

which are the beginning of the

Christ, who first begotten (the

He is...

R.v. 21.
Fig. 7A. Thomas Matthew Bible, 1549.

Fig. 7B. Thomas Matthew Bible,
Fig. 8. Thomas Matthew, 1549. Psalm 91:1
“Bugge” Bible.
Fig. 9. Great Bible, 1541. New Testament Title Page.
Fig. 10. Great Bible, 1541. Genesis 3.
Fig. 11A. Stephanus Greek New Testament, 1551. Title page from 1569 printing.

Fig. 11B. Matthew 4-5 from 1569 Stephanus edition.
THE
NEWE TESTAMENT
OF OVR LORD
JESUS CHRIST.

Conferred diligently with the Greke, and best approved translations in divers languages.

ECCLES.

VERSE 18, HEB. IV..3.

BE not FORGETTEN, AND \BE
hold the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you this day.

THE LORD SHALL FIGHT FOR YOU.
therefore take ye your rest, and be at peace.

AT GENEVA.
PRINTED BY ROPERCHE WALE.
M. D. LX.

Fig. 12. Geneva Bible, 1560. New Testament Title Page.
Fig. 13A. Geneva Bible or “Breeches” Bible, 1599. See Genesis 3:7 for “breeches.”

Fig. 13B. Geneva Bible. 1 Corinthians 13:4-13. Note the use of “love” in the text.
Fig. 15. Bishops’ Bible, New Testament Title Page, 1602.
Though I Spake in the tongue of Men, and of Angels, and Have not Charity, I Am as Ringing Bell, or as Ringing Trumpet.

And though I Prophesy, and Understand all Mysterious Affairs, and all Knowledge, ye shall not have Charity, ye shall not be edified.

And though I Speak with Tongues, and cannot Translate, I Am as Ringing Bell, or as Ringing Trumpet.

And though I Have Knowledge, and Understand all Mysterious Affairs, and all Knowledge, except I Have Charity, I Am not beneficial, I Am nothing.

And though I Have Knowledge, and Understand all Mysterious Affairs, and all Knowledge, and Am not Charitable, I Am not beneficial, I Am nothing.

And though I Speak with Tongues, and Cannot Translate, I Am as Ringing Bell, or as Ringing Trumpet.

And though I Have Knowledge, and Understand all Mysterious Affairs, and all Knowledge, ye shall not have Charity, ye shall not be edified.

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And though I Have Knowledge, and Understand all Mysterious Affairs, and all Knowledge, except I Have Charity, I Am not beneficial, I Am nothing.
THE NEW TESTAMENT OF IESUS CHRIST, TRANSLATED FAITHFULLY INTO ENGLISH, out of the authentical Latin, according to the best corrected copies of the same, diligently conferred with the Greeke and other editions in divers languages: With Amendments of Offices and Chapters, Annotations, and other necessarie helps, for the better understanding of the text, and specially for the discerne of the Corruptions of divers late translations, and for clearing the Controversies in religion, of those dates.

IN THE ENGLISH COLLEGE OF RHEMES.

Wh. 718.
De int. et int. ex mem. hom. et in hom. alam in hom. scilicet et illam.
This is,
Give me understanding, and I will search thy law, and will keep it with my whole heart.

S. Aug. trac. 2 in Epist. Joan.
Omnia quae legis, in Scriptura, ac obedientia de Deo, nonem hancque nonem
et ex instr. necessarie iustificat, et quia adversus hanc hanc nonem
quem quidem filia iustificat, quodque istam in omnibus nonem.
This is,
All things contained in Holy Scriptures, we must hear with great attention, to our instruction and comfort; but some things specially must be so infused into our
memories, which makes much against discourses, unless otherwise made not on
attention and regard to the weaker sort and the names negligent persons.

PRINTED AT RHEMES,
by John Fugay.

1582.

CVM PRIVILEGIO.

Fig. 17. Rheims, New Testament Title Page, 1582.
Mark 14, Last Supper

1. The final supper of Jesus with his disciples
2. Judas Iscariot's betrayal
3. Jesus' prediction of his arrest and crucifixion
4. The Institution of the Eucharist
5. The washing of the disciples' feet
6. The Lord's Supper

Fig. 19. Bishops-Rheims Parallel New Testament, 1602, Mark 14, Last Supper.
THE HOLIE BIBLE
FAITHFULLY TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH,
OUT OF THE AUTHENTICAL LATIN.
Diligently conferred with the Hebrew, Greeke, and other Editions in divers languages.

With Arguments of the Booke, and Chapters: Annotations: Tables: and other helps, for better understanding of the text: for discovering of Corruptions in some late translations: and for clearing Controversies in Religion.

BY THE ENGLISH COLLEGE OF DOWAY.

Hæc excusa tibi gloria, et honor, et laus. 
Hæc excusa tibi gloria, et honor, et laus.
You shall draw waters out of the same fountain.

Printed at Doway by LAWRENCE KELLM, 
at the signe of the holie Lambe. 
M. DC. IX.
Fig. 21. King James Version, 1611. Title Page.
14 And they lay at his feet until the morning: and she rose up before one could know another. And he said, Let it not be known, that a woman came into the house.

15 Also he said, Bring the bale that thou hast upon thee, and holde it. And when she helde it, he measured six measures of barley, and laide it on her: and he went into the citie.

16 And when shee came to her mother in law, shee said, Who art thou, my daughter? and she tolde her all that the man had done to her.

17 And she said, These six measures of barley gave he me, so he said to me, Go not emptie into thy mother in law.
Fig. 23. 1611 King James Version. Decalog.
**Fig. 24A. 1611 King James Version. Lord’s Prayer.**

**Fig. 24B. 1611 King James “She” Bible, Matt. 26:36, “Judas” Bible.**
The Textual Base for Modern Translations of the Old Testament

by Rolf Schäfer and Roger Omanson

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the history of scholarly texts of the Hebrew Bible up to the Biblia Hebraica Quinta, which is currently being published in individual fascicles at the rate of one or two volumes a year. It also helps the reader understand why translations of the Bible in English are sometimes so different even though the translators almost always base their work on the Hebrew Masoretic Text.

Introduction

Baptists have discussed, argued, and fought about whether or not the Bible is inerrant and infallible. It is not the purpose of this article nor the following on the New Testament to enter into that debate. But two things are certain: (1) we do not have any of the original writings of either the New Testament or the Old Testament, and (2) the existing manuscripts do contain differences in content and wording, and they do contain mistakes.

Yet when new translations of the Bible appear, it is often said that they were “translated from the original languages.” What this means, of course, is that they were translated from Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, not that they

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were translated from the original manuscripts written by the biblical authors.¹ But then, what manuscripts or materials do modern-day translators actually have in hand from which to translate? And from where did these materials come? This article will answer these questions.

For most Christians in the English-speaking world, the King James Version was the only form of the Bible known and used for the past several centuries. Only since the latter half of the twentieth century have English-speaking Christians begun to read frequently from newer translations.² Some years ago, A. G. Newell lamented the fact that all of these new translations have created numerous “disadvantages” for the church.³ Among the problems that he noted were these two: (1) the reader becomes aware that these translations reflect the interpretations of the translators, and this introduces “an element of doubt into the minds of the weaker brethren”; and (2) the reader becomes aware of the fact that translators do not always follow the same base text, whether the Hebrew text or the Greek text. The situation has not changed in the thirty years since Newell wrote his article; in fact, even more English translations have come into existence: the New Jerusalem Bible (1985), the New Revised Standard Version (1989), the Revised English Bible (1989), the Contemporary English Version (1995), and the English Standard Version (2001), to name just a few.

This article and the following article in this issue discuss in some detail the history of scholarly editions of the Hebrew and Greek texts. It is important that Baptists—indeed, all Christians—understand the answers to the questions posed above: What manuscripts or materials do the translators actually have in hand from which to translate? And from where did these materials come?

For the Old Testament, the situation is different from that of the New Testament. Modern translations of the Old Testament begin with what is called “the Masoretic Text” [MT]. Not all scholars and translators agree on how closely the MT should be followed. While some scholars think that it should be followed as closely as possible,⁴ others think that more attention should be given to variant readings in other textual traditions such as the Septuagint or the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵

Not all scholars and translators agree on how closely the Masoretic Text should be followed.

The average reader of the Old Testament is not even aware of how many places some translations in the past fifty years have corrected the Masoretic...
Text by following a reading in the Septuagint or from Qumran. Just as an example, consider the first chapter of 1 Samuel in the NRSV (1989), where verses 9, 11, 18, 22, 24, and 28 all contain differences from the KJV because the NRSV translators have followed either a reading from Qumran or from the Septuagint, or in some cases from both. Furthermore, how many readers of the NRSV even realize that a whole paragraph has been added to the end of 1 Samuel 10 on the basis of a reading found in manuscript 4QSAm at Qumran?6

**What is Old Testament Textual Research?**

All reliable translations of the Old Testament into any language used today must be based on the ancient manuscripts that have survived to the present day. The important task of determining the Hebrew text (most of the OT) and Aramaic text (portions of Daniel, Ezra, and a few other verses) most faithful to the original writings is a complex one because there is no document that dates to its biblical author (the autograph), but only imperfect, although carefully crafted copies, from later periods. Many of the prophetic writings, for instance, date from the ninth to the sixth centuries BCE; but the very oldest fragments of copies in Hebrew and Aramaic that exist come from the second century BCE.

In the third century BCE the Hebrew Bible was first translated into Greek; this so-called Septuagint is the oldest and most important indirect witness from that era for the wording of the Hebrew/Aramaic text.7 Further ancient translations were later added, above all the translation into the common ("Vulgata") Latin, the Syriac "Peshitta," and the Aramaic "Targum."

The oldest direct witnesses for the text of the Hebrew Bible are the manuscripts found in 1947 and thereafter in the Judean Desert that had been hidden in caves near Qumran on the western edge of the Dead Sea.8 These ancient manuscripts include the remains of some two hundred transcriptions of individual books of the Bible from the period between 150 BCE and 70 CE. Apart from one single transcription of the Book of Isaiah preserved in its entirety, the biblical texts from Qumran are mere fragments, on which in most cases a very limited number of legible words, often only a few characters, can be made out.

The oldest complete copy of the entire Hebrew Bible as we know it today is Codex Leningradensis from the year 1008 CE. Another ancient copy, the Aleppo
Codex, dating from almost a hundred years earlier (930 CE), is unfortunately no longer complete. Codex Leningradensis and the Aleppo Codex are two prime examples of the so-called Masoretic text (see below).

Old Testament textual research sets out to identify accidental errors in, as well as deliberate changes to, the text of the Hebrew Bible that were made over the course of time. It seeks wherever possible to correct these by first identifying variations in transmission by comparing the existing manuscripts against each other and against the ancient translations and then reconstructing the original version by means of rigorous scholarly criteria. On the basis of manuscript evidence alone, the best attainable wording of the Hebrew Bible leads us back to the text as it was around 200 BCE. Because of the incomplete nature of the textual witnesses available to us today, this oldest attainable text form cannot, however, be reconstructed to the same extent in all cases. In order to present a uniform text in a printed edition of the Hebrew Bible, one must dispense with the creation or construction of a text form corrected according to scholarly criteria (as in the case of the New Testament). Rather, it is expedient to print a copy of the “Masoretic Text” and then to list, where necessary, the existing textual variants in what is called “the critical apparatus” at the foot of each page. Also in this location, any scholarly suggestions for improvement of the Masoretic text can be noted.

The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS), the outcome of the findings from more than one hundred years of Old Testament textual research, follows this principle. The BHS is in universal use today and is esteemed among scholars from all Christian and Jewish backgrounds as a highly reliable edition of the text of the Hebrew Bible. It provides the basis both for training clergy in the original language of the Old Testament and is the basis of all reputable modern Bible translations.

**Background: “Masorah” and “Masoretic Text”**

A peculiarity of the way in which the Hebrew language is normally written is that it is written without most vowels. For more than a thousand years, the consonants were written, but the vowels required for pronunciation had to be supplied by the reader. This is true of the Qumran manuscripts. This “consonantal” text of the Hebrew Bible has been regarded as fixed (not to be changed) since the first century CE, and the Jewish people have ever since attached great importance to its precise transmission. The problem remains that the consonantal text frequently allows for different possible pronunciations and thus potentially also different meanings. Knowledge of
the correct pronunciation and meaning therefore had to be passed down from generation to generation together with the written text. Around 600 CE, Jewish scholars, the so-called Masoretes (literally “conveyors of tradition”), finally developed a system of vowel and stress marks that also precisely fixed or established the pronunciation, and thus the meaning, of the Hebrew Bible text. The Masoretes at the same time undertook textual research of the highest quality. In addition to establishing a fixed pronunciation and meaning, they also endeavored to secure the biblical text against mistakes in copying and, wherever possible, to correct existing errors. To this end, in the margins of their manuscripts they added detailed notes on writing (orthographic) variants, statistical information on the frequency of particular words, and even directions as to where they considered a reading different from the transmitted consonantal text to be necessary. This compendium of marginal notes is referred to as the Masorah Parva (“small Masorah”).

Along with this lesser collection of notes, the Masoretes also compiled lists of entire passages from the biblical text distinguished, for example, by a characteristic orthographic variant, a particular sequence of words or other peculiarity. These lists, collectively referred to as the Masorah Magna (“large Masorah”), are included at the top and bottom of the pages of the Masoretic manuscripts.10 The highly meticulous work of the Masoretes gave rise to the term for those carefully copied biblical texts that they made, the “Masoretic Text.”

In fact, the Masoretes were so meticulous in their work that they even “counted the verses, words and letters of the Law and other parts of the Scriptures as a procedural aid in monitoring manuscripts and in checking their accuracy.”11 Because of their careful work done between the sixth and eighth centuries CE, from that time onwards there has been a largely uniformly transmitted version of the Hebrew Bible with only minor textual variations.

**The Biblia Hebraica by Rudolf Kittel (BHK)**

*The Beginnings: The First Edition of the Biblia Hebraica by Rudolf Kittel (1906)*

Around 1901, the German Old Testament scholar Rudolf Kittel (1853–1929) developed a plan for a critical edition of the Hebrew Bible. Kittel’s *Biblia
Hebraica (BHK) was published in 1906 in two volumes. As its basis, Kittel chose the Hebrew so-called “Textus receptus,” edited by Jakob ben Chayim. This was a version of the Masoretic Text that Daniel Bomberg had published in Venice in 1524/1525. Through the centuries since its first publication, it had become universally recognized as the definitive text of the Hebrew Bible. Kittel printed this Hebrew text with its vowel and stress marks, but without the surrounding Masoretic commentaries and notes (the Masorah Magna and Masorah Parva). At the bottom of the pages, he included a concise critical apparatus with textual variants from other known Masoretic manuscripts and from the ancient translations (primarily the Greek Septuagint).

A milestone: The Third Edition of the Biblia Hebraica by Rudolf Kittel (1937)

In 1921, the Württemberg Bible Society (WBS) acquired the rights to Kittel’s Biblia Hebraica. In addition to a reprint of the existing edition, a revision of this work was undertaken from 1925 onwards. The “Codex Leningradensis” from 1008 CE had been discovered by Paul Kahle in Leningrad, Russia; and because it was the oldest manuscript of the Masoretic Text preserved in its entirety, it subsequently served as the textual basis for this edition. The critical apparatus was divided into two portions: “slight variants and less important items of information” and “the real textual changes and other more significant matter.” In this way, the reader was provided with an evaluation of the significance of that information. Above all, however, the margins of this third edition included the Masorah Parva from Codex Leningradensis, although without further treatment or explanation. The complete revision was published 1937 as the third edition of Kittel’s Biblia Hebraica (BHK3). This publication laid the foundation for the high international esteem enjoyed by Biblia Hebraica and prepared the ground for the later BHS.

The further development of the BHK

In 1947, the discovery of the Qumran scrolls opened up a new dimension in Old Testament textual research. For the first time, Hebrew/Aramiac manuscripts, some 1,000 years older than Codex Leningradensis, became available as reference texts. This discovery cast entirely new light on the history of the texts; and the textual variants of the Qumran manuscripts could not, of course, be omitted from the Biblia Hebraica. For technical reasons, however, the typesetting of BHK3 could only be modified to a limited extent. Moreover, the Hebrew matrices used in printing BHK3 had been lost or
destroyed in the course of WW II. The variants from the two best-preserved Qumran texts, for example—the Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa) and the Habakkuk Commentary (1QpHab)—both of which were extremely important to research, could not be simply incorporated into the existing apparatus. As a compromise, these Qumran variants were added to the respective volumes starting with the 7th edition of 1951 as a third section of the critical apparatus in the margin of the pages and in a different typeface. Reprints of the BHK appeared in this form up until the mid-1970s.

The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS)

As the best printed edition of the Hebrew Bible, the BHK3 was in great demand. Naturally, as a result of the inevitable wearing of the printing plates, the print quality of the BHK3 deteriorated over the course of time. The need for a complete resetting was already becoming evident in the late 1950s. A revision also proved necessary for reasons of content, especially in view of the increasing number of text fragments from Qumran that were now coming to light as they were published by scholars around the world. This task of revising BHK3 was undertaken by Karl Elliger (Tübingen) and Wilhelm Rudolph (Münster) as chief editors in cooperation with Hans-Peter Rüger (Tübingen) and an international team of Old Testament experts.

To distinguish the new edition from its predecessor, its title was given the supplement “Stuttgartensia.” In all important aspects, the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) followed its predecessor BHK3. As before, the Leningrad Codex served as the textual basis. For the first time, the codex was printed with a complete version of the Masorah. The notes of the Masorah Parva appeared in the outer margin while the appropriately edited lists of the Masorah Magna were published in a separate volume, with a numerical reference system in the apparatus of the BHS. Unlike in the BHK3, the textual variants and suggested corrections were once more grouped together in a single apparatus, but the new critical apparatus was more concise and more clearly set out overall.

The technical demands of this undertaking presented a major challenge to the WBS. For the Hebrew text, a specially modified typesetting unit had to be acquired and adapted, a suitable typeface produced, and typesetters appropriately instructed. The first fascicle of the BHS appeared in 1969 and the work was completed in 1977. By reason of its high reliability and quality, the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) has met with great acclaim worldwide and attained a large circulation. To this day, it has remained the only complete
scholarly edition of Codex Leningradensis, with all important text variants and suggested corrections presented as footnotes.

**The Future of the Biblia Hebraica: The Biblia Hebraica Quinta (BHQ) Project**

Since the BHS was first published, three decades have passed during which time much has developed in the field of Old Testament textual research. Most important, the fragments of the Qumran manuscripts have now all been published; research into the Greek Septuagint has made considerable progress; and a new, complete large-edition of the Latin (Vulgata) is now available. At the same time, different expectations are now placed on any edition of the Hebrew Bible. Of greatest importance, any new edition of the Hebrew Bible must provide a clear, reliable representation of all known textual variants, insofar as they are relevant to biblical translation and exegesis. By doing so, the edition will place the reader in a position to make his or her own judgment of any given textual situation. The subjective views of the editor, on the other hand, are to recede into the background and be readily distinguishable at all times from the presentation of actual variants.

The apparatus of the new *Biblia Hebraica Quinta (BHQ)*, which is currently being drawn up and published by an interdenominational team of international experts, follows these principles. The BHQ continues in the tradition of Kittel’s *Biblia Hebraica*. As before, the textual basis is the Codex Leningradensis, the salient characteristics of which are now also rendered in print as precisely as possible, including the Masorah Parva and—for the first time—the Masorah Magna. The apparatus, devised in accordance with the principles outlined above, contains a wealth of new information. For the first time, the BHQ includes an accompanying commentary in which the editors explain to the user their text-critical judgments, provide a translation of the Masorah Magna, and list and discuss the special characteristics of the Masorah Parva and Masorah Magna.

After a preparatory period covering a good ten years, the first volume of the BHQ, containing Ruth, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, and the editors’ commentary, appeared in 2004. Subsequent fascicles which have been published include Ezra-Nehemiah (2006), Deuteronomy (2007), Proverbs (2008), The Twelve (2010), and Judges (2011).
Textual Criticism and Modern Translations

The above paragraphs have answered the questions “What manuscripts or materials did the translators actually have in hand from which to translate, and from where did these materials come? One may wonder, then, if most translators begin with the same printed Hebrew text, why translations into English (and other languages also) differ so much from one another. There are several answers to this question.

Why Modern Translations Differ from One Another

Sometimes translations differ simply because the translators have used different styles or different words to translate the same meaning. But sometimes the translations really do have different meanings. Why is that?

(1) Even if different translators or translation teams are translating the very same Hebrew words, they sometimes interpret the meaning of the words differently. For example, in 2 Kgs 4:42, the RSV says that a man from Baal Shalishah brought “fresh ears of grain in his sack.” The Hebrew word translated “sack” occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible, and its meaning is uncertain. The New Jerusalem Bible says the grain was “still in the husk,” and James Moffatt translated this as “in a basket.”

Or, to take one more example, a few verses earlier in 2 Kgs 4:39 the RSV says that cooks gathered some gourds from the field and threw them into the cooking pot, “not knowing what they were,” that is, the cooks did not know what the gourds were. The Hebrew is literally “for they did not know.” NAB translates these Hebrew words as “without anybody’s knowing it,” that is, the other prophets did not know that the cooks had added the gourds to the stew.

(2) Sometimes different translators disagree on which text is closest to the original. For example, in the verse just mentioned above—2 Kgs 4:39—the Hebrew says “for they did not know.” The Latin Vulgate and the ancient Syriac read “for he did not know . . .” Some English translations have the plural (they), and some have the singular (he), because the translators have followed different texts.

(3) Sometimes the earliest attainable text simply does not make sense. Most translators attempt to provide a meaningful translation in such cases. For example, in the Hebrew text, Job 24:18-25 is nearly impossible to translate. The Jewish Publication Society translation called TANAKH (2nd edition 1999)
has the following footnote at v. 18: “From here to the end of the chapter [v. 25] the translation is largely conjectural.”

Or to take one more example, the Hebrew text of 1 Sam 13:1 says “Saul was years old when he began to reign and he reigned two years over Israel.” It seems obvious (1) that his age has been accidentally omitted from the text and (2) that the number of years he ruled over Israel seems too few. But what did the text say originally? For various reasons, translations have supplied various numbers, including the following:

“one year . . . two years” (KJV);
“thirty years . . . forty-two years” (NIV);
“thirty years . . . twenty-two years” (REB);

Some translations follow the Septuagint and omit this verse completely (so GNB). Others, such as NRSV, leave blank spaces for the two numbers: “Saul was . . . years old when he began to reign; and he reigned . . . and two years over Israel.”

A new Swedish translation of the Old Testament, published in 2000, left sixty-seven gaps, marked [—], each representing a couple of words or up to one verse in the MT. The English translation REB has an interesting footnote to its translation of Job 19:26: “probable reading; Hebrew unintelligible.”

Conclusion

Biblical scholars have worked diligently to establish what they consider to be the closest text to the original text. Of course, not all scholars follow the same methodologies or have the same presuppositions, so their conclusions will be different. Likewise, biblical translators have many decisions to make in determining what a text means before they translate it into their own language. That such decisions have been made should come as no surprise to informed readers of the Bible. Hopefully, this article has helped readers understand more fully what sources textual scholars and translators use in their work.
1 Scholars are not even sure any longer what it means to speak of the “original text.” This is too complex an issue to discuss within the focus of this article, but see Gary D. Martin, *Multiple Originals: New Approaches to Hebrew Bible Textual Criticism*, Society of Biblical Literature Text Critical Studies 7 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 11-61.

2 For a discussion of these more recent translations, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).


6 This longer reading was known to the Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* VI, 68-71) and is considered original by the textual scholar Emanuel Tov (*Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd rev. ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 342-44).


8 The literature on the Dead Sea Scrolls is enormous and often quite technical. There are, however, a number of recent helpful introductions for the non-specialist, including the following: Robert A. Kugler and Eileen M. Schuller, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls at Fifty* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999); James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002); C. D. Elledge, *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); and Weston W. Fields, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Short History* (Boston: Brill, 2006).


The Textual Base for Modern Translations of the New Testament

By Florian Voss and Roger Omanson*

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the history of scholarly texts of the Greek New Testament. It also helps the reader understand why modern translations of the New Testament in English are sometimes so different even though the translators almost always base their work on the same printed editions of the Greek text.

Introduction

Unlike the Old Testament, where translators begin with the printed edition of a specific ancient manuscript, translators of the New Testament begin with a critical edition of the Greek New Testament, that is, with a text that has been created by scholarly reconstruction and which is not, therefore, identical to any ancient handwritten manuscript.

I. What is New Testament Textual Research?

New Testament textual research deals with the question of what form the precise wording of the Greek New Testament originally took.¹ This

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question arises because all original manuscripts of the twenty seven books of the New Testament have been lost. Only transcripts from subsequent centuries (for the most part papyrus fragments from the second and third centuries and full manuscripts on parchment from the fourth century on) have been retained. Today, some 5,700 manuscripts exist that contain the text of the New Testament or some part of it. They are complemented by biblical citations in the writings of the church fathers from the first few centuries, although it is often difficult to determine whether a church father intended a literal quotation of a scripture or a mere allusion. Finally, translations of the Greek Bible into other languages—especially Syriac, Latin, and Coptic from the second and third centuries—as indirect witnesses of the Greek text are a further important source for textual research. The reconstruction of the wording of the Greek text from its translation into another language is often, however, a very demanding task.

In some cases, considerable discrepancies exist between these manuscripts; the discrepancies are often due to mere oversights that arose in hand copying the texts from a master copy (or as dictated by a reader); but in some cases, the differences result from deliberate “improvements” by the scribes, by means of which they endeavored to make the transmitted text clearer, more consistent, or more orthodox. Research into the textual history of the New Testament sets out to reconstruct with scholarly care the original text of the scriptures and to trace the text’s subsequent history.

Textual research proceeds largely as follows:

- The individual manuscripts are deciphered.
- The texts reconstructed by this means are compared and discrepancies between them (variants) are determined.
- The variants are analyzed. On the basis of a set of carefully designed criteria the degree of interdependence between the variants is investigated and—with a lesser or greater degree of certainty—the original version established. One particular criterion is especially decisive: the one reading which can best explain the origin of all other readings is most likely original.
The results of such textual research are then integrated into scholarly editions of the Greek New Testament. The reading deemed original appears in the main body of text (principal text), and the most important variants are presented in an extensive list of notes at the bottom of each page (in the critical apparatus). The reader is thus in a position to better understand the decisions of the editors and to form his or her own opinion. It is not the task of textual research to pass judgment concerning inspiration of the biblical text, nor to determine whether the original text contains deficiencies or factual errors. Textual research is not in a position to contribute toward resolving such theological-hermeneutical issues. The most widely distributed scholarly editions of the New Testament today are the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece and the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament. Many readers of this article no doubt used the UBS Greek New Testament in seminary classes.

II. The Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece and its History

Its Beginnings (First Edition, 1898)

The Novum Testamentum Graece was first published in 1898 by the Württemberg Bible Society. It was edited by Eberhard Nestle and followed a simple but nevertheless ingenious principle: Nestle compared the three most significant editions of the Greek New Testament from the nineteenth century (Tischendorf, Westcott/Hort, and Weymouth; the last-mentioned was replaced by the edition of B. Weiss in 1901). Wherever one of these versions differed from the other two, Nestle adopted the reading given in the two identical versions and supplied a note in the apparatus showing the divergent reading. By this means, he grouped together the best findings of New Testament textual research from the nineteenth century and prevented one-sided views from becoming established. Nestle's edition, due to its wide distribution, ultimately displaced the "Textus Receptus," which had already long become obsolete among scholars, in churches and schools.

Background Note: The "Textus Receptus"

Textus Receptus (Latin for "[universally] received text") is the name given to a form of the Greek New Testament that had been regarded as definitive in
scholastic and clerical circles since the Reformation. This designation, used by the editor Elzevier, made it clear that this text was the form in general usage at the time (1633). Usually, Erasmus of Rotterdam’s edition of the Greek New Testament (1516), upon which Elzevier’s edition was largely based, is regarded as a representation of the Textus Receptus. The Textus Receptus, having provided the basis of several important biblical translations from the time of the Reformation (e.g., Martin Luther’s German translation and the King James Bible), was widely distributed in the church. Since, however, the Textus Receptus was based on relatively late, unreliable manuscripts of the New Testament, the confidence placed in it by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars has proven to be unfounded. Erasmus based his first edition of the Greek New Testament on four manuscripts of the so-called Byzantine family of texts that dated back only to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although this text was for the most part transmitted by the majority of the existing manuscripts, recent research has found it to be a late development based on a form of the text that had already shown significant departures from the original text.

Thus, in the eighteenth century the Textus Receptus began to be called into serious question among scholars. Johann Albrecht Bengel, for example, designated in his 1734 edition of the Greek New Testament a list of passages for which readings different from those of the Textus Receptus can lay claim to originality. The editions of Tischendorf (1869, 1872) and of Westcott-Hort (1881) succeeded in superseding the Textus Receptus in scholarly research, but Eberhard Nestle’s Novum Testamentum Graece was the first to begin supplanting the Textus Receptus in clerical and liturgical usage. Revised translations of the Bible were subsequently produced in accord with the improved textual base, such as Luther’s Bible (1912, 1984) and the Revised Standard Version (1952), a reworking of the King James Bible. Today the Textus Receptus is the basis for relatively few modern translations of the New Testament, such as the New King James Version. The Orthodox Church also still makes use of a Bible strongly dependent on the Textus Receptus.

Further Developments of the Nestle Text up to the Present Day

Thirteenth Edition (1927): The text of the first Nestle edition was reprinted several times in subsequent years. Under Erwin Nestle, a son of Eberhard,
The thirteenth edition was the first time further developed with the addition of its own critical apparatus that cited not only other scholarly editions (see above), but also the most important ancient manuscripts. Nestle, however, did not consult the manuscripts directly, but continued to compile his information on their readings from other scholarly editions.

Twenty-fifth Edition (1963): The German scholar Kurt Aland (co-editor since 1952) was the first to verify the information in the text and critical apparatus against the manuscripts themselves. Together with his colleagues at the Institute for New Testament Textual Research (INTF), which he established in 1959, he also extended the apparatus to include readings from many additional manuscripts. This new approach reached its early culmination in 1963 with the twenty-fifth edition (thereafter known as “Nestle-Aland”), which has been frequently reprinted.

Twenty-sixth Edition (1979): The great manuscript discoveries of the twentieth century (especially of early papyri) necessitated a fundamental reorientation of the principal text and a rewriting of the apparatus, and these were both introduced in the twenty-sixth edition. Ongoing work on both the Novum Testamentum Graece and the Greek New Testament (published in 1975: see below) was now being overseen by one editorial committee (formed in 1955), and the principal text of the former edition was now identical to that of the latter one. The two most widely used scholarly editions of the Greek New Testament have thus since shared the same biblical text and differ merely in terms of their apparatuses, introductions, and appendices.

 Twenty-seventh Edition (1993): In this revision, the text-critical apparatus in particular was once more extensively modified with a view to enhanced reliability and reader-friendliness. The Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, from its first edition in 1898 to the present day, has provided an outstanding working text suitable for study and research as well as for church and school use, in a compact, affordable edition. It puts its readers in a position to make their own judgments in matters of New Testament textual research.

III. The UBS Greek New Testament and its History

The Beginnings (from the Establishment of the Editorial Committee up to the First Edition, 1966)

On the initiative of the American Bible Society, a committee of experts was formed in 1955 to prepare for the publication of a new edition of the Greek New Testament. Its members included Kurt Aland, Matthew Black,
Bruce Metzger, and Allen Wikgren. The new edition was to be specially oriented towards the needs of biblical translators. Accordingly, the first edition of the *Greek New Testament* (1966) offered in its apparatus only variant readings for passages that were particularly uncertain or were highly important for the purposes of translation and exegesis. The new edition provided translators with a clear and convenient means, using the alphabetical letters A–D, of grading each variant included in the Greek text as to the editors’ certainty of its originality. In addition to the text-critical apparatus, the editors included a punctuation apparatus that laid out differences in punctuation relevant to the sense of the text in the various Greek editions and in significant modern translations. The principal text included a number of deviations from the text provided in the Nestle-Aland up to the twenty-fifth edition.

*Further Developments up to the Present Day*

*Third Edition* (1975): The Committee’s intensive work brought about a fundamental overhaul of the Greek New Testament, and its revised principal text also became the basis for the twenty-sixth edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (see above). For this third edition, the punctuation apparatus and the index of Old Testament allusions and quotations were also thoroughly reworked by the Translation Department of the American Bible Society.

*Third Corrected Edition* (1983): While the principal text subsequently remained largely unchanged and was modified (along with the punctuation apparatus) only “in matters of punctuation,” the Institute for New Testament Textual Research (INTF) subjected the critical apparatus to a thorough revision, based on the work for the twenty-sixth edition of Nestle-Aland (see above), published in 1979.

*Fourth Edition* (1993): In tandem with revisions made to the twenty-seventh edition of the Nestle-Aland, the critical apparatus of the Greek New Testament was upgraded once more (while the principal text was retained in unmodified form). At the same time, the punctuation apparatus was again reworked by the present author, a translation consultant for the United Bible Societies (UBS). The Greek New Testament is not intended as a basis for comprehensive text-critical work, but provides a foundation for translations of the New Testament worldwide. It presents to its users a reliable Greek text, and for selected passages—wherever significant variants exist in the New Testament manuscripts—elucidates the course of its development.
IV. The significance of the two editions today

The current editions of the Novum Testamentum Graece and the Greek New Testament offer their readers the distillation of more than one hundred years of research. They are in worldwide use today and are accepted widely throughout the church as the basis of work on and with the Bible. They provide a foundation for nearly all modern biblical translations and serve as the basis of training in New Testament studies for clergy and teachers both at state universities and at seminaries. Yet as before, these texts continue to be constantly reviewed and improved. Revised new editions currently under preparation will incorporate the findings of the latest textual research.

V. Modern translations and the Greek text

Just as was noted in the previous article regarding modern translations and the Hebrew text, there are also differences between modern translations of the New Testament even when translators have followed the same Greek base text. The differences may be explained in the same terms as for the differences in Old Testament translations.

(1) Even if different translators or translation teams are translating the very same Greek words, they sometimes interpret the meaning of the words differently. For example, in 2 Pet 1:20, the writer says “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation” (RSV). But what do the words “one’s own interpretation mean”?

(a) Some scholars think this means that private individuals do not have the right to interpret the scriptures apart from the teachings of the church. This understanding is the basis for the NJB rendering (also NRSV, REB, NAB): “the interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never a matter for the individual.” The meaning will then be “that the prophetic message should not be interpreted according to a person’s whims and fancies. This statement is of course directed at the false teachers referred to in the next two chapters, who are diluting Christian teaching and twisting it to suit their own fanciful ideas.”

(b) Other scholars think the words “one’s own” refer to the Old Testament prophets and that the phrase means that what is written in the scripture is not dependent on any prophet’s own ideas or efforts. This understanding is the
basis for the NIV rendering (also ESV): “no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation.” The meaning will then be more fully explained in what follows in v. 21.

(2) Sometimes different translators disagree on which text is closest to the original. According to some manuscripts of 2 Thess 2:13, the writer says “God chose you as the first fruits [aparchen] for salvation . . .” (so NRSV, NAB). Other manuscripts say that “God chose you from the beginning [ap’ arches] to be saved” (NJB, REB, “from the beginning of time God chose you . . .”). The decision is difficult here, as attested by the fact that modern translations are evenly divided on which reading is followed.

(3) Sometimes the earliest attainable text simply does not make sense. In the Hebrew text, there are numerous passages where the Hebrew words simply do not make sense. In the first nine chapters of 1 Samuel alone, for example, NRSV has the footnote “Meaning of Heb uncertain” five times (at 1 Sam 1:5, 18; 4:2; 7:2; and 9:24). In the New Testament, the situation is far different. While there are numerous passages in which it is not clear which reading is original, the text at least makes sense. One exception to this is 2 Pet 3:10. The text printed in both Nestle-Aland and the UBS Greek New Testament says that on the day of the Lord, “the earth and everything that is done on it will be found.” This makes no sense to most scholars. Some manuscripts say “will not be found”; another manuscript says “will be found dissolved.” Other manuscripts say “will disappear” or “will be burned up.” Scholars have proposed many corrections to the Greek text here, but even if the reading “will be found” is considered original, the meaning is not at all clear. Perhaps it means “will be found by God.” This is the basis for the REB translation: “will be brought to judgment.”

**Conclusion**

Any translation of any work of literature is only as good as the source that is translated. This is true for the New Testament as well as any other literature. For this reason, text-critical scholarship is an essential part of the whole process of understanding the New Testament writings. Eckhard Schnabel has stated the matter clearly and succinctly:

Textual criticism seeks to determine the authentic words of the original author. Before one can ask the question “What does the text mean?” one needs to ask, “What does the text say?” And this question implies the basic question “What is the text?” (2) Textual criticism provides a
firm foundation for Bible translation. Since the majority of Christians have access to the NT only via translation, the results of textual criticism are of fundamental importance, as Bible translations seek to represent as accurately as possible the original text of the author.¹

¹ Just as was noted in the previous article regarding the text of the Old Testament, an increasing number of New Testament scholars are raising questions regarding the meaning of the words “the original text.” See, for example, the recent discussion in Robert F. Hull Jr., The Story of the New Testament Text: Movers, Materials, Motives, Methods, and Models, Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Study 58 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 156-59.


On the Relevance of Translation Theory

By Stephen Pattemore*

ABSTRACT

Theories of communication, which emphasize pragmatic dimensions of language—the use of language in a particular context—guide contemporary Bible translation. For the Bible translator, at least two contexts are important—that of the original delivery of the text, and that of the contemporary reading audience. Relevance Theory (RT) holds that what we say is merely a clue to what we mean and has to be interpreted within the intended context of ideas. Thus, RT provides a principled means for evaluating the role of context in the creation and reception of meaning. This paper briefly explains the issues involved, outlines some of the key ideas of RT, and provides some examples of the way in which considerations of relevance can influence translation.

Reading Between the Lines

Try as I may, I find it almost impossible to understand the currents of thought that swirled around the appearance of the Bible of 1611. The Preface, “From the Translators to the Reader,” from which I might expect some help, is at times clear and cogent, and at times seems itself to be lost in the mists of a past age.1 It is not that I cannot read and understand the sentences. It is reading between the lines that is so difficult. Yet that is what I really want to do. Why does that particular sentiment appear on the surface of the text? What lurks beneath? Why do the translators use the first 1500 words of their

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Preface to recite examples of great people of the past who did well and were “calumniated” for it? Who are “those nursing fathers and mothers . . . that withdraw from them who hang upon their breasts . . . livelihood and support fit for their estates”?

If such is the difficulty of reading a document 400 years old and in my own language, how much more opaque the Scriptures themselves, coming from alien cultures, written in foreign languages, evoking a context 2000 years old! Yet, again, reading between the lines is precisely what I want to do, to unlock the secrets trapped in the interstices between words and sentences, because I am convinced that only then will I really be able to understand what was going on. I want to understand it because I approach the Bible as a Christian, a member of a confessing community which has for nearly 2000 years held these particular documents as central and normative. Why these documents and not others? What was it in that first interchange of meaning that started them on their path to canonization?

There are at least two common responses to this dilemma, neither of them totally satisfactory.

A historical critic will say that much of the information I lack is accessible if only I will search hard enough. Historians and classicists, archaeologists and biblical scholars have uncovered a vast trove of “background information,” or “context.” And this does indeed help to fill in some of the gaps. Were I to read all that is known about Henry VIII and William Tyndale, about the religious rivalries of the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth, the political aims of James I, the Hampton Court conference and its outcome, I would certainly be better placed to understand the nuances and the silent assumptions of the Preface. The same goes for the Bible. My problem, now, is that in each situation I have too much context. Just how much is necessary to read between the lines?

On the other hand, a postmodern critic will say that all I have is the text and I just have to get used to that. The authors and their meanings are irretrievably lost and we confront a never-ending recession of signification. I must make of it what I will. Yet, though I have learned much of value from postmodern approaches, I am never satisfied that this fundamental pessimism about the construction of meaning is genuinely true to the human condition. We regularly, and for the most part successfully, communicate meaning to each other by word and gesture and text. When I hear or read what appears to be a token of intentional communication, I relentlessly pursue the meaning
that I assume to lie behind it. This no less true when the author of the communication is removed from me in time and space. There are large parts of the KJV Preface that I am convinced I do understand correctly. Certainly, the greater the distance, the wider are the gaps between the words, and the possibility of missing the meaning greater. But even to admit the existence of misunderstanding is to acknowledge and privilege understanding.

For undoubtedly the Translators’ Preface to the KJV was intended to be understood by its readers—not just in its surface form but in its hints and implications. The authors presumed on a great deal of interest among the readers—enough for them to persevere through pages of apparent ramblings before reading anything pertinent to the new translation of Scripture they held in their hands. The Preface is in all respects a typical record of an act of communication. One group of people seeks to change the mental state of another group by means of a coherent text, assuming that the readers have knowledge not only of the grammar and semantics of a language, but of a whole socio-cultural context of ideas, events, and places. What is true of the Preface is no less true of the translation it introduces, and ultimately of the source texts themselves. The KJV represents an act of communication between the translators and the Christian public of seventeenth-century England, but not an independent and original one. It claims faithfully to represent an earlier act of communication, or rather multiple earlier acts, in which biblical authors sought to change the mental state of their readers within their own socio-cultural contexts.

It is this understanding of translation as an act of communication, between specific people embedded in a particular context, that underlies most modern theories of translation. This was not always the case.

**Communication and Context**

People often think of language as a kind of code. To communicate a thought from my mind to yours I must encode it in words and sentences which you in turn must decode (using the same code book as I did) to generate the thought. The meaning is essentially contained within
the text. This *Code Model of Communication* dominated throughout much of the second half of the last century and formed one of several theoretical foundations on which Eugene Nida based his “theory of translation.” This was the most influential theoretical framework for translation prior to the rise of “Translation Studies” as a secular discipline. His way of understanding translation continues to influence Bible translation around the world to this day—in particular the idea that the *form* of a text and its *meaning* were separable, and that in Bible translation at least, the effective communication of the *meaning* must take precedence over preservation of the *form*. Growing awareness of more complex dimensions internal to the text itself (discourse structure) and of the function of text not so much as containers of meaning but as signs pointing to something else (semiotics) led to significant refinements of the earlier theory. But developments in linguistics and communication theory began to undermine its theoretical underpinnings. In particular, the code model was found inadequate to account for the subtlety and power of human communication. Increasingly, theories of communication have taken into account the importance of context, inference, and the cooperation between participants in the construction of meaning. These *pragmatic* accounts of communication have had impact on our understanding of the nature of translation. Wilt, for example, uses the metaphorical concept of communication “frames”—subsets of context marked by the restrictions of language, organization, and socio-cultural situation—within which communicators and audience negotiate meaning by mutual interaction. Nord has built on the functionalist ideas of Vermeer to develop *skopos* theory, according to which the success of a translation is measured against the negotiated interests of sponsor, translator, receptor community, and text.

**Relevance in Communication**

Operating at a more fundamental level is the *Relevance Theory* (RT) proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986 and applied to Bible translation by Ernst-August Gutt shortly thereafter. The fundamental insight of RT is that we rarely say exactly what we wish to communicate. We usually say less than we intend, and choose our words for their ability to point efficiently to our meaning. If I shout “Fire!” in a crowded room, it will be understood by everyone to mean, “The house is on fire. Leave the building immediately.” I could say exactly what I mean, but it would not

We usually say less than we intend, and choose our words for their ability to point efficiently to our meaning.
be so relevant, because it would take too long for the listeners to process and might not gain their attention in the first place. Similarly, few in the room would interpret my utterance to mean, “Squeeze the triggers of your guns,” although in another context that might be the precisely relevant meaning. No code system conceivable distinguishes these two meanings of “Fire!” Context does that.

This may seem an unusual and extreme example. But these same factors determine much of our communication habits, spoken or written. When we hear (or read) a token of communication that was clearly intentional (ostensive communication), we assume it is as relevant as possible, and search for contexts in our understanding that lead to results that are beneficial in some way. Finding the first such context and its implied meaning, we stop processing. The party-goers running for fire exits do not stop to probe deeper as to whether I actually intended them to shoot their guns. These ideas, expressed in language drawn from pragmatic linguistics and cognitive psychology, provide Relevance Theory with a framework for understanding how human communication works.

Meaning is underdetermined by the message that carries it. Even when all the laws and resources of syntax and semantics have been applied the results must be interpreted through extensive use of inference before the sender’s meaning can be reached. The text interacts with its intended context to prompt the audience towards the meaning, driven by our instinct to find the communication relevant. Context in RT is a cognitive concept—a set of propositions that we hold to be true or probably true. The sum of all such ideas is our cognitive environment. By evoking a context the speaker both compels and constrains the listener towards a specific interpretation. The ideas derived inferentially from the text of a communication are called contextual effects, which may be explicatures or implicatures. Explicatures are assumptions derived from the text itself, including the results of assigning reference to pronouns, general terms, and deictic particles (words such as “here” and “there” or “now” and “then,” which handle the “orientational” features of language that are relative to the time and place of utterance), resolving ambiguous terms, and enriching concepts in the text from the listeners’ memories. Implicatures, by contrast, can only be derived by processing the text in a particular context. They result from the interaction of text and context.

Relevance itself is defined comparatively. An idea communicated is more relevant if it has many contextual effects for the listener. The communication

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**The King James Bible After 400 Years**

**Spring 2011**

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Even when all the laws and resources of syntax and semantics have been applied the results must be interpreted through extensive use of inference before the sender’s meaning can be reached.
is also more relevant if it requires less mental processing effort to understand. A communication is optimally relevant when it is worth the listener’s effort to process it, and it is the most relevant text that could have been generated consistent with the speaker’s abilities and preferences.\textsuperscript{7}

Thus, human cognition takes place in a balancing act between processing effort and contextual effect. Communication works because the audience assumes that the communicator intends to communicate and intends to be relevant. Communicators work on the same assumptions and craft their messages to lead their audience to their intended meaning with appropriate degrees of effort. Context is not determined in advance, but various contexts are accessed progressively as a message is processed, as listeners access their short term memory of previous parts of the conversation, information stored in their longer term memory, and other environmental factors to which the message points them.

**Relevance Theory and the Bible**

RT was developed largely around considerations of face-to-face conversation. Sperber and Wilson envisaged it, however, as applying equally to written communication and to literary texts.\textsuperscript{8} The ability of RT to explain the use of non-literal language in literature arises from a distinction between descriptive use and interpretive use of language.\textsuperscript{9} In the former, an utterance (or text) is used to represent an actual state of affairs. In the latter, an utterance represents the speaker’s interpretation of another representation (e.g., an utterance or thought). Reported speech, metaphor, simile, and irony are all examples of interpretive use, and poetic language can be shown to operate by generating a large number of weak implicatures.\textsuperscript{10} Since RT holds that no sharp cut-off can be defined between strong author-intended implicatures and a long tail of progressively weaker contextual effects for which the audience must take increasing responsibility, it explains the nuanced effects of literary texts on varying audiences, and the reality of multiple readings. Thus, RT’s treatment of literature is neither a deterministic author-centered approach nor a deconstructive audience-centered approach. Rather it functions to explain how each approach operates. The Bible is a special
case of a literary text. Thus, RT offers a framework for understanding firstly how each original communication act would have been understood by its first audience within the cognitive environment they shared with the author, and secondly how subsequent audiences, assuming different sets of priorities within their cognitive environments, arrive at differing readings. RT also provides a principled way of evaluating the role of intertextual quotation and allusion.

Biblical texts, then, are not simply packages of information waiting to be unwrapped, containing within themselves all that is necessary to understand them. Context is vital for understanding, but not context as a vague unbounded situation for the texts. Context that is relevant to understanding consists specifically of the assumptions about their world shared by the author and audience—and just sufficient of these to make sense.

**Relevance and Bible Translation**

RT is equally interested in what goes on when a translator offers to a new audience a text purporting to represent a text originally given to another audience in another language. Ernst-August Gutt pioneered the application of RT to Bible translation. Finding the usual notions of “equivalence” problematic, Gutt suggested that RT’s concept of “descriptive usage” provided a basis for explaining translation. Translation is a second order act of communication—it claims to faithfully represent an earlier and primary communication. The translator may choose to present to the new audience a text that requires it to access elements of the original context in order to understand it correctly. This Gutt describes as direct translation, or, more recently, “s-mode translation” because it centers on representing the stimulus. Alternatively the translator may choose to present a text that the new audience can understand correctly using their own readily accessible contextual clues. This is indirect translation or “i-mode translation,” as it represents the interpretation. Of course no extended translation is ever exclusively s-mode or i-mode but usually some mixture of the two. But what Gutt has done is to force translators to consider what context they are expecting the readers of the translation to have access to, and, therefore, how they will measure their success.

Considerations of the relevance of the communication event place a number of constraints on translators. How much information implicit in the
source text should be made explicit in translation? Traditional translation practice has no principled way of dealing with this, and translational adjustments proposed or modeled sometimes set the translated text adrift from its context.

RT redefines the boundaries by introducing the concepts of explicatures and implicatures. As a slight oversimplification, we may say that in translation explicatures may be raised to the status of assertions in translation (e.g., the river Jordan; Jesus [he] said . . .) without greatly distorting the communication content of the text. But much greater care needs to be taken with implicatures, which when asserted in translation often entail their own new and unintended set of implicatures.

Another issue has to do with “contextual consistency” (as opposed to “lexical consistency”) in translation. Translational adjustments can drastically change the nature of one of the most accessible dimensions of context—the text itself—obscuring patterns in the tapestry, with a consequent loss or distortion of meaning.

Given the richness and diversity of English, a single source language word may force the translator to choose between several synonymys. How should this be done? Should a single one-to-one equivalence be maintained consistently? The KJV translators made a point of the freedom which they assumed, not to be legalistically consistent in their translation of some terms, advancing “reasons inducing us not to stand curiously upon an identity of phrasing.”

But source language words with multiple meanings usually cannot be translated by a single word in the target language, because of the different semantic range of the source language and target language equivalent. Nida and Taber express this idea as the “Priority of Contextual consistency over Verbal Consistency”: “it is inevitable that the choice of the right word in the receptor language to translate a word in the source-language text depends more on the context than upon a fixed system of verbal consistency.”

This appears consistent with RT’s stress on the importance of context, but it contains a hidden danger if insufficient attention is given to the importance of the text itself (and other texts to which it alludes) as a component of the mutual cognitive environment of a particular item. Assuming that authors are self-conscious and deliberative in their composition of texts, we may suppose that they choose a particular word or phrase in full awareness (and an assumption of mutual awareness) of its previous use in accessible contexts. These other contexts (earlier parts of the same text, or other texts
evoked) are therefore part of the context of interpretation of the new use of the word or phrase, *even when a semanticist might decide that they are being used in a different sense!* When a translator chooses to translate with a different word in the new context, this web of contextual implication is broken and the interpretation of the translated text will be different from that of the original.

### Examples of Relevance in Translation

Inspired by RT, translators will examine the text not as an artifact, but as a token of communication. Firstly, they will seek interpretations that will optimize relevance *within the world of the original author and audience.* This will involve analysis not only of the text but also of the context that contributes optimally to the meaning communicated. Then, before beginning to craft a new translated text, translators must decide whether they will assume their audience has access to the original contextual assumptions or whether they will need help. If the latter is the case, how will it be provided: by making contextual assumptions explicit in the translated text; or, by providing insights into the context using contextual notes, maps, glossaries, introductions and other helps?

We conclude with a few specific examples of the way RT might influence translation.

1 Corinthians 10:7

μηδὲ εἰδωλολάτραι γίνεσθε καθὼς τινες αὐτῶν, ὡσπερ γέγραπται, Ἐκάθισεν ὁ λαὸς φαγεῖν καὶ πεῖν καὶ ἀνέστησαν παίζειν.

KJV: Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.
NRSV: Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.”
GNB: nor to worship idols, as some of them did. As the scripture says, “The people sat down to a feast which turned into an orgy of drinking and sex.”
Contemporary readers, left to themselves, would almost certainly understand “rose up to play” against a background of assumptions quite irrelevant to the context of the original communication event. But how far should translators go to help the reader? Ellingworth and Hatton judiciously observe that “TEV’s [= GNB] translation of the quotation from Exod 32.6b is a vivid paraphrase, the meaning of which may be implied in the Greek but is not expressed.” But how far should translators go to help the reader?

Not only has GNB explicated the sexual component, but it has also regrouped the drinking with the play/sex/dance rather than with the eating, where it belongs. This is a clever rendering of some implicatures of the original, but itself carries so many further implicatures (particularly to do with drunken sexual behavior) that are at best only weakly derivable from the text.

1 Corinthians 10:18

βλέπετε τὸν Ἰσραὴλ κατὰ σάρκα· οὐχ οἱ ἐσθίοντες τὰς θυσίας κοινονοὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου εἰσίν;

KJV: Behold Israel after the flesh: are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?
NRSV: Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?
GNB: Consider the people of Israel; those who eat what is offered in sacrifice share in the altar’s service to God.

The NRSV translators rightly considered that contemporary audiences do not have appropriate context by which to understand “kata sarka”—or rather, that they would most likely bring quite wrong assumptions to bear. But even the NRSV leaves a lot of work to the reader. What does it mean to be “partners in the altar”? This rather unusual phrase is capable of a wide range of meanings, corresponding to different contexts. Assuming the Corinthians were familiar with the Jewish sacrificial system, the meaning was probably clear to them. Ellingworth and Hatton comment, “Paul is appealing to well-known facts and common beliefs,” including an understanding that worshippers normally ate together from the sacrificial offering at the altar. But contemporary audiences need some help. The GNB chooses to make some of the background explicit but in
a way that is itself ambiguous and problematic, having its own quite different set of possible implicatures. One minority language translation I checked offered as a backtranslation of their final version: “are the ones who make the sacrifice at the altar.” Now this is a reasonable implicature of GNB’s version, but not of the original, and ends up with the people and priests very much confused with one another.

Revelation 7:2-3\textsuperscript{19}

Does the “sealing” of the servants of God have anything to do with the “seals” on the scroll? And how should translators handle this? Several other texts or current ideas have been suggested as providing the background necessary to understanding this passage. These include the seal as a mark of ownership (of slaves), Passover (Exod 12), Ezekiel 9, and the rite of baptism. There appears little immediate motivation for access to the context of the Exodus or of baptism, and both these contexts raise so many questions of difference as to greatly increase the effort to process them. Ezekiel 9 is closer, but still raises a number of difficulties. The cultural context of slave ownership and the seal or brand as its mark would have been easily accessed and would have provided significant good contextual effects for the hearers. But the immediate previous co-text in chapter 6, of the breaking of the seals, is more readily accessible still. The choice of identical terminology is not accidental but deliberately ironic. The opening of six seals has revealed the wrath of God against disobedient humanity. But here there is a simultaneous sealing to take place. And just as the inexorable revelation of the judgment of God has been marked by a repetitive formula (“When he opened the... seal”), so now the sealing of God’s servants is emphasized by repetition (7:2, 3, 4, 5, 8). Against the background of the unsealing of the scroll, with its attendant disasters, a process of sealing secures the people of God.

Most major English versions retain this possibility with a reference to “sealing,” although GNT does dilute the effect a little by saying “marked with God’s seal.” CEV refers throughout this scene, however, to “marking” rather than “sealing.” This could be seen as a good example of contextual consistency, but in fact it loses the connection completely, and in the process sets up a closer connection than is warranted to another mark not yet mentioned at this point—the mark of the beast.
Revelation 21:1

Καὶ εἶδον οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινήν. ὁ γὰρ πρῶτος οὐρανὸς καὶ η ἑρωτη γῆ ἀπῆλθαν καὶ ἡ θάλασσα οὐκ ἔστιν ἔτι.

Many Christians have taken these verses to imply the destruction of the current earth before the appearance of the new heavens and earth and the absence of a sea on the new earth. RT helps rectify this by demanding we look for elements of close context that might constrain interpretation and translation. Careful analysis of the structure of Revelation suggests that this shorter New Jerusalem vision (21:1-8) is very closely linked to the previous vision of the last judgment (20:11-15), which therefore forms a very readily accessible context. Therefore, when we read that the first heaven and first earth have “passed away” (21:1), this is a consequence of 20:11, where they fled from before the face of the Judge, like actors fleeing off stage. In this close context, there is no reason to push the word ἀπῆλθαν (apēlthan) beyond its normal meaning: went away, left. The old heaven and earth have simply left the scene, not been destroyed. The cross-references provided in GNB and CEV point to the “new heaven and new earth” in 2 Pet 3:13. But readers who follow this cross-reference may receive the added implication from 2 Pet 3:12 that the “passing away” in Rev 21:1 is the same as the destruction of the heavens by fire. It would be better for cross-references to point readers backwards to Rev 20:11 as a relevant context of interpretation. The translation “disappeared” is then perhaps acceptable, but translations should not move in the direction of “cease to exist.” We also read in this context that the sea is no more, not as predicting an earth without its marine environment, but describing the end of chaos and the power of death, because in 20:13, along with Death and Hades, the sea holds the dead. A cross-reference to Rev 20:13 would help, but for the average modern reader, whose normal understanding of the word “sea” does not include the concept of “chaos,” it may also be necessary to explain the background in a footnote.

RT’s concern for optimal relevance—good cognitive effects without undue processing effort—suggests that the destruction of the earth and heavens is not explicitly asserted here, and the reader can readily understand the “new heavens and new earth” as the result of God’s program of renewal as expressed in 21:5, “See, I am making all things new.” Heaven and earth, which were old and tired and fled the stage in the previous scene, now return renewed and revitalized.
On the Relevance of Translation Theory
Review and Expositor, 108, Spring 2011

Relevance and Translation

Considering the Scriptures as records of ancient acts of communication allows us to bring contemporary theories of communication to bear, both to understand what is going on in the original context, and to create new texts in new languages to allow new audiences to have access to the original event.

RT offers an olive branch to both historical and post-modern critics. To the historicist, it affirms that the historical context is vitally important for understanding. With the post-modernists it agrees that every different audience will read the text differently, depending on the contextual assumptions they bring to it. But it also challenges each group to greater rigor. On the historical-critical side, RT provides a limit to the context relevant for interpretation and challenges the interpreter to evaluate that context more critically. On the post-modern side, RT challenges incipient intellectual laziness. Texts do not simply mean what I want them to mean. There is an ethical obligation to the authors and their contexts, to those who received and treasured the text, and to the Holy Spirit as the yet-present author, to optimize the relevance of the communication represented by the text.

To the translator, RT does not so much offer a methodology of translation as a perspective from which to apply the techniques and strategies for communicating meaning to a new audience in a different socio-cultural context. Methods of exegesis, techniques for finding equivalences, strategies for presenting necessary contextual assumptions, in fact the whole aim and expectation of the translation project are seen no longer as a task on paper. Rather we participate in a new communication event, reflecting the original one, constrained not simply by linguistic criteria, but by loyalties to communities of people and ultimately to God as the great Communicator.

As the KJV translators insisted, a translation does not simply represent the word of God, it is the word of God.\textsuperscript{31}
1 The full preface is rarely printed. It can be conveniently accessed as Appendix A in David G. Burke, ed., Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections of the History and Legacy of the King James Bible (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 219-42.


5 Christiane Nord, Translation as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997).

6 Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, Relevance: Communication and Cognition, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Ernst-August Gutt, Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context, 2nd ed. (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2000). Both of these seminal works are now in their second editions.

7 Sperber and Wilson, Relevance, 125.

8 Ibid., 75.

9 Ibid., 224-43.

10 A number of authors, such as Ian McKenzie, Paradigms of Reading: Relevance Theory and Deconstruction (Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan, 2002) and Adrian Pilkington, Poetic Effects: A Relevance Theory Perspective (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000), have taken the application of RT to literature much further.

11 It is distinct in its multiplicity of authors and contexts of communication (many details of which are not known), the time depth through which contemporary audiences must examine it, and not least the overlay of the assumption by some (readers and authors) that it represents a message from God. See Stephen Pattemore, Souls under the Altar: Relevance Theory and the Discourse Structure of Revelation, UBS Monograph Series 9 (New York: UBS, 2003), 38-45.


15 Burke, Translation That Openeth the Window, 237-38.


19 Ibid., 200.

19 For a detailed treatment of this chapter see Pattemore, People of God, 117-64.

20 Indeed, there is no unambiguous instance where aperchomai means “cease to exist.”

21 Burke, Translation That Openeth a Window, 231.
Issues in Bible Translation in Africa

By Lynell Zogbo

ABSTRACT

While all Bible translation projects face difficult challenges, those in Africa must deal with some unique issues: (1) the difficulty of finding appropriate renderings for key terms such as “grace” and “angel” in cultures where Christianity is relatively “new”; and (2) the problem of rendering items mentioned in Scripture that do not exist in the tropics, for example “bear” and “camel,” etc.

On the other hand, African exegetes and translators may have certain advantages over Western ones since their context and worldview often shares features with the biblical one. For example, the importance of community values, the notions of honor and shame, generosity and hospitality, the presence of polygamy, slavery, and even circumcision as a sign all make the message of the Bible less foreign and easier to render in translation for an African audience. Along with some shared cultural values and practices, some linguistic structures and expressions (“son of man,” “in the hand of,” “dying you will die”) are common to both African and biblical languages.

The challenges are real, but the news is good: the African church is slowly awakening to the role it must play in Bible translation, not only in practical matters, but also in crucial decisions concerning theology, exegesis, and translation renderings.

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Introduction

Bible translators worldwide face a number of challenges as they attempt to render the Scriptures in a way that is faithful to the original, natural, and understandable in the target language. This job is never an easy one, no matter where it is carried out. Translators and exegesis working on the African continent face a unique set of challenges, even if they benefit as well from some important advantages. In the first part of this study, we will present examples of special problems encountered by African Bible translators, as well as some areas where African translators and readers may have advantages over Western readers and exeges. In the second part, we will discuss in some detail the translation of an important biblical metaphor against an African backdrop.

Challenges African Translators Face

One of the biggest challenges faced by some African translators is the relative “newness” of Christianity. Even if in the 1800s, European missionaries were able to proclaim the gospel and produce Scriptures in many parts of Africa, in many regions Christianity is barely a generation, i.e., fifty years, old. When Bible translation is carried out in these locations, translators are faced with an incredible number of issues such as how to render completely new or unfamiliar biblical notions, including crucial theological concepts such as “grace” and “justification” along with key terms like “prophet” and “angel.” Potential readers may have never heard expressions like “the son of God,” “Spirit of God,” “Holy Spirit,” etc. If the Scriptures have been or are being translated either through simultaneous translation in a church setting or in written scriptural publications, the local renderings may have been chosen with very little anthropological or theological research. Moreover, it goes without saying: rectifying incorrect or misleading past translation choices may prove very difficult indeed.

This is not to say that African cultures do not have extensive vocabularies dealing with spiritual matters. The challenge is rather for mother tongue translators and exeges to understand their own cultural systems and then systematically search for words and expressions that can appropriately express
biblical notions. Usually the generic name of God (Hebrew: elohim) does not pose a problem, because virtually all African cultures share a common belief in an all powerful Creator God, even if this Divinity is far off and inaccessible.\textsuperscript{4} For other terms, however, the challenge is considerable. In some African languages, there are several words or categories of “spirits” and it is not be easy to determine which terms should be used for “the spirit of the Lord (Yahweh),” “evil spirits,” “demons,” “angels,” etc. Other African languages may have just one word for “spirit,” used to refer to both good and bad spirits.\textsuperscript{3} Thus, translators must decide if a single word can be used to speak both of demons and the Holy Spirit. If translators choose to qualify this word, by speaking of “evil spirit,” does that send an unspoken message to readers that good spirits do in fact exist and that Christian believers can continue to worship them? Indeed many less informed African Christians “cover all the bases” by worshipping Christ in church and then leave the church service to offer sacrifices to “good genies” who ensure success in crops and school exams, fertility within the family circle, and protection against the “bad spirits.” Another difficulty is that not all cultures and languages have a concept of a major evil spirit, that is, the devil or Satan. Some African cultures, influenced to some extent by Islam, have borrowed from Islam a word such as Shatana, but no generic term for “devil.” Translators must therefore look for and use substitute expressions such as “the enemy of God” or “the chief of evil spirits” to render “devil” in their language.

Cultural references and images found in the Bible may also pose serious problems for Bible translators. On a purely physical level, biblical “realia” (physical objects, animals, plants, instruments, etc.) may simply have no equivalents in the African world. For example, the bear is totally unknown, and so most often will be rendered as a “wild,” “ferocious” or “dangerous animal” (1 Sam 17:34). Surprising as it may be, in African languages spoken in the deep tropical rain forest, it is very difficult to translate Jesus’ famous saying “It is easier for a camel to pass through an eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” This is because, even if needles are known, camels are not! Along the same line, grapes and wine are not indigenous to many desert and tropical regions in Africa. Translators must not only find equivalents for these words,
but the whole semantic field associated with them: vineyards, winepresses, “new wine,” new and used wineskins, trampling, etc. Yet again, the way the sower plants his seed in Mark may be totally unfamiliar to the target audience, along with a word like “yoke” which obviously does not exist in places where no cattle are raised. Translators must use much creativity to find equivalents that communicate with faithfulness the message of Scripture, all the while not violating the historicity of its texts.⁶

Poetic language is another challenge to translators, especially if the basis of comparison is unknown. For example, in Isa 1:8, we read:

And the daughter of Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.

While the first and last lines are understandable, the images in the middle lines would be very difficult for most translators to render in their mother tongue. First, what is a “booth,” a “vineyard,” a “lodge”? In some languages, there may not even be a word for “cucumber”! Translators are encouraged to render poetry as poetry,⁷ but how can one render images that use unknown terms and make comparisons one cannot understand? Translators can attempt to render these lines more or less literally, but for the translation to have a real impact and for it to communicate the real meaning behind the text, poetic lines may need to be re-arranged, the main ideas may need to be made more explicit, and some images may need to be converted or reduced. For example, for Isa 1:8, it might be possible to say:

And Jerusalem-town, the daughter of Zion,
is like a city they (impersonal) are attacking,
It is abandoned like a (watch)-tower in a field of grape-bushes,
It stands alone (undefended) like a (temporary) hut in a field
(after the harvest is over).

After understanding the meaning of the text, translators would then need to look for ways to render the same meaning but using the stylistic
devices in their own language to communicate the impact of these strong poetic lines.

**Advantages of Being an African Translator**

While all Bible translators face serious challenges, African translators may have some advantages over Western exegetes, translators, and readers. These include shared features of culture, worldview, and even linguistic structures. Most scholars would agree that Africans in general have a worldview far closer to the world of the Bible than Europeans or Americans. For example, notions such as kingship, polygamy, and slavery are well known across Africa, even if these practices are nowadays being supplanted.

Like the cultures described in the Bible (especially the Old Testament), most African cultures are, by definition, community-based: honor and shame, hospitality, generosity, and the keeping of alliances are crucial parameters defining basic values. Whether a particular culture practices a tight system of kingship with well-defined lines of authority or has a far looser structure based on clans, in most African societies, the welfare of the community is considered far more important than that of the individual. Indeed, in many cultures, it can be dangerous to exercise one’s individualism. It is far safer to promote the status quo. This corporate or group consciousness, foreign to many Western cultures, is at the foundation of both Jewish and African cultures. Thus, certain behaviors described in the biblical text may make better sense to an African reader than to a Western one, and consequently the translation of such passages will pose less difficulty.

There also seems to be a close cultural “match” between the biblical world and the African one concerning some fundamental attitudes towards women. While the status of women in the biblical world (from the time of the Old Testament and extending into the time of Paul) is ill-defined and somewhat problematic, with women seemingly relegated to a secondary or low position, careful examination of and reflection on the biblical texts reveal that women play outstanding roles in the universal plan of salvation: Eve’s heel crushing the serpent’s head, Tamar maintaining the line of descendants, Rahab saving the spies, Ruth providing the heir to the throne, Mary bearing the Savior. Similarly, the seemingly low status of women in some parts of Africa masks but never hides the incredible strength of African women and their crucial role in society at all levels. Along these same lines, the African notion of
“love,” often expressed in African languages in terms of loyalty and unfailing commitment, seems far closer to the Hebrew concept of *chesed* than its Western counterpart, a romantic love often lacking commitment and lost in exaggerated sentimentalism.

Another interesting underlying feature of both cultures, biblical and African, is the paired notions of purity and impurity. While Islamic practices clearly imitate those found in the book of Leviticus, many people do not realize to what extent most traditional African religions share this important distinction. Sacrifices must be “pure,” menstruating women are “impure,” ritual washings must be carried out in any number of ways for any number of reasons. Certainly the notions of priest (in French, “sacrificateur”), the concept of animal sacrifice (down to the details of slitting the throat of the victim), the role of blood as atonement or the basis for a never-ending pact can be found at the heart of most cultures in Africa. Thus, understanding and translating Leviticus or understanding the motivation for Christ’s sacrificial death and describing its role as atonement may come far easier to African exegetes and translators than to Western ones. African Bible translators can profit from such similarities in worldview as they seek to communicate effectively the meaning of Scripture.

On a linguistic level, there are also important links especially between Hebrew and many African languages. From a linguistic viewpoint, Africa can be divided into three major sub-families: Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, and Khoisan. Some may find it surprising that Hebrew, belonging to the Semitic branch of Afro-Asiatic, is actually related to many African languages including Amharic (Ethiopia), Arabic (Northern Africa), Hausa (Chad, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, etc.), along with many other languages spoken in the Sahel region (Touareg, Tamsheq, etc.). Thus, from a purely structural point of view, there may be points of resemblance between the Hebrew text and renderings in some African languages. Besides these genetic connections between languages, there is also a linguistic phenomenon known as “areal features.” These are...
characteristics, and in some cases, actual expressions, which spread throughout a given region, whether languages are related or not.

An example of an interesting correlation between African languages and Hebrew is the expression “son of man,” which has its roots in the Old Testament, but became key in the New Testament, as reported in the speeches of Christ. Surprisingly, a similar expression with a similar use exists in many languages across the African continent.\(^{13}\) While Western translators frequently ask, “How will anyone understand that Jesus is referring to himself when he speaks of the ‘Son of Man’?” African readers are rarely confused. They have already heard these words being used in their own languages to express notions similar to those used in the Gospels. Thus, while Jesus says, “The son of man has no place to lay his head,” in a similar way, in languages across Africa, this expression will be used to express human frailty, weakness or need: “This son of man is hungry” = “Have pity on me; give me something to eat”; “A son of man is tired” = “I am tired,” etc. The use of this construction in defiant statements of Christ relating to his second coming (“You will see the son of man coming on the clouds...”) finds its counterpart in expressions of defiance in some African languages, such as Bete: “You will not see (this) son of man go there!” = “You will never see me there!” Of course, translators who have such expressions in their language need to investigate to see in what context and with what connotations they are used before using them systematically and in all contexts in the New Testament.\(^{14}\)

The Hebrew language has a special construction known as the infinitive absolute, which has proven difficult for exegetes and translators throughout the world and for centuries. It is made up of a cognate verb and object, often rendered literally with a participle, as in Gen 2:17: “dying you will die” (literal Hebrew: “to die you will die”). Some translators choose to render this expression literally, while others either ignore it or use some emphatic form to highlight the verbal phrase. But in many African languages, similar constructions exist. For example in some languages, one might express emphasis similarly by repeating the verb: “X gave Y cotton give” = “X really did give cotton to Y” or “To buy Musa bought corn to plant” = “Musa bought corn (i.e., had to buy corn, did not borrow it) to plant.” Research has shown that even within narrative and poetic texts, these repetitive constructions often play the same pragmatic role in both Hebrew and the African languages
where it occurs: it is not just marking emphasis in a sentence but signaling a high point or pertinence in the story line. These linguistic matches help African translators to better understand and render the Hebrew text.

Finally, another important “match” puts African translators and readers at an advantage. This is in the domain of the translation of prophetic poetry and some wisdom literature such as Ecclesiastes. In the 1960s, when dynamic equivalence translation came into vogue, serious attempts were made at rendering and presenting the text in a way that would be acceptable to various target audiences, especially to young people unfamiliar with standard King James or RSV texts. Because the messages of some of the prophets and of Qoheleth did not seem appropriate in poetic form from a Western point of view, many poetic passages were presented as prose in common languages translations. African translators and readers, however, have no problem with this seeming “mismatch” of genre, since it is very common in Africa to use song (i.e., poetry) to criticize religious and political leaders, to denounce immoral social practices, to recount history, and to give warnings for the future. Indeed, in many African languages, poetry has many points in common with the stylistics of Hebrew poetry: repetitive parallelism, refrain, frequent use of rhetorical questions, etc. Thus translating biblical poetry into poetic lines in African languages is not only possible, but also highly recommended. Of course, African renderings lend their own touch of originality, as for example, the use of a special category of words not found in many Western languages: the ideophone. These unusual sounding forms, almost “picture words,” evoke specific emotions or characteristics. In Chewa, for example, the greenness of the tree growing by the stream in Psalm 1 can be effectively expressed by repetitive ideophone:

Onse masamba ali biliwiliwili!
All of its leaves are shiny green!

Thus, while transferring poetry from one language to another is a huge challenge in any language, African translators may be helped by similarity in genre styles, poetic devices, and even this unique category of words to convey special emotions.
An important metaphor

Despite the interesting points of similarity between African and biblical worldviews, genres, and linguistic structures, there remains a significant number of “mismatches.” One interesting problem concerns the metaphorical expression, “rock,” often used in cries for help to Yahweh or affirmations of trust in him, which are so prominent in the first and second books of Psalms (Pss 1-72; specifically 18:3, 32, 47; 19:15; 27:5; 28:1; 31:3; 61:3; 62:3, 7-8; 71:3); in other Psalms (73:26; 78:35; 83:8; 89:27; 92:16; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1); as well as in certain prophetic passages. While exegetes do not agree about the major semantic traits being emphasized (do they express protection, stability, or God’s unchangeable nature?), all do agree that the metaphor designating the Divinity carries strong positive connotations within a context of adversity or conflict.

Throughout Africa, however, the notion of “rock” often has very different connotations, and they are not always positive. Across the continent, and more specifically in West Africa, large out-jutting rocks are, along with certain large trees and rivers, considered sacred. “Genies” (good and evil spirits) dwell in these locations, where they are invoked and where they receive blood sacrifices. Prayers are offered for riches, happiness, success, fertility, security, etc. Thus, it is not unusual in various regions to see a large grouping of rocks stained with blood, with a smattering of chicken feathers, and other unusual markings – i.e., pure white cotton strips tied around the rocks themselves. Prayers offered at “the rock” are often for protection, whether the dangers being invoked are spiritual or material. For example, in Niger, Zarina fishermen (of the Sorko cast) offer sacrifices on rocks jutting out of the river to protect them from dangerous hippos or alligators.

Given the sacredness of these locations, in some cultures, only certain members of society may be allowed in their vicinity. For example, in Angola these rocks are not visited “by just anyone”; they are “mysterious.” Likewise, in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), these dwelling places of spirits are not accessible to all, but rather only to the initiated or older members of the community. In other cultures, however, stone outcroppings may be a major meeting place, playing a major role in community life, being the place of regular and/or annual sacrifices.

In the Baoulé culture (Côte d’Ivoire), the “rock” plays a central role in traditional worship. The word “rock” evokes immediately in all speakers the
notion of a “god,” as well as a place where one goes to ask for protection from danger. The Baoulé expression “Let’s go to the rock” means “Let’s go worship/sacrifice” (to ancestors and/or genies, not God).21 The rock (yēbue or yēgbue) is in fact considered “a little god,” which is fixed, hard, lasting through time, not able to be uprooted or displaced. It serves as a spiritual intermediary and a protector.22 Often this rock is situated near a source of water, facilitating animal sacrifice, which may include chickens, sheep or even a cow or bull, usually on a yearly basis. This is also where important alliances are sealed, in the presence of (and by invoking) the spirits. The place is to be kept pure at all times, and while all may go to the rock, a number of strict rules protect its sacredness: menstruating women may not go to the rock, “normal” non-sacrificed food may not be eaten there, and pregnant women cannot visit this location on given days (Wednesdays and Fridays!). Finally, it is not permitted to speak evil of this “god.”23

In some cultures, rocks are associated with important historic events. For example, in one location in DRC, a specific rock is known as the first place a white explorer arrived. It is reported that genies appear regularly at this rock, sometimes in the form of a man, and sometimes as a woman with three breasts. In recent times during the war, genies are said to have appeared at this rock to prevent rebels from attacking a nearby village. These rocks, associated with important ancestors and actors in history have become important places of worship.24

Attitudes towards the “rock” vary from one culture to another and from one language to another. While in some cultures (Doowayo, Cameroon), the rock evokes fear, in others, some speakers say the word “rock” evokes a powerful divinity who answers prayer.25 In Toussaint culture (Gur, Burkina Faso), bits of the larger rock are broken off and taken home from the sacrifice place and hidden in houses, where they will be venerated by future generations.26

In some cultures, the name “rock” may be given to children when they are born. Among the Baoulés, for example, a child may be named Yēbue or Yēgbue. This person may be so named because of the relationship between a particular family and the rock, and the person named ‘rock’ may then “represent for his family a force of spiritual importance.”27 The person may be feared because of his or her mystic powers that can be used against others.28 “You do not fear this child, man, or woman; you can insult them or disrespect them, but (you must be careful) to not insult or offend this little ‘god’ this
person represents.” If the rock is offended, one must go to the rock, not the person named rock, to ask forgiveness.

In Baoulé culture, the person named “rock” is usually known as someone having a difficult personality. The following advice was given by an old man: “Never name one of your sons ‘rock.’ Rocks are hard. If you make the mistake of naming one of your sons ‘rock,’ he will have a difficult personality, hard like a stone.” When a certain pastor with this name committed suicide, people surmised that: “He died because his name was Yébue. Demons took advantage of a moment of spiritual weakness... and led him to commit suicide.” A village with the name Yébueko (“village of stone”) is considered by some to be cursed because of its name. Following its founding, this town never grew and its inhabitants eventually abandoned it.

In other cultures, “rock” may be part of a name acquired after birth, imposed by others, or assumed by the person himself. Thus, in Woroduguka, a Mandé language spoken in Côte d’Ivoire, some young people call themselves Gbofia, kawa nyamjunghun, “the rock, the wrong side of a stone,” evoking their dependability and hard work. Nothing (no hard task) scares them, so their presence is reassuring.

In many cultures, rocks are used figuratively to refer to problems that are difficult to solve or to people who exhibit certain personality traits. In Mwan, comparing people to a rock means that they are hard-hearted, resistant towards others. Such people are difficult, refusing to forgive or to let others have their way. In Kikongo, a rock may refer in a figurative sense to an obstacle and problem that is difficult to resolve. Thus it is reported that a big witch (sorcié) gave himself the name “Scratch the rock” (kalata tadi), meaning that he is invincible and has great spiritual power. Anyone who “scratches the rock” (attacks him) will be in great trouble. In a Christian song in Baoulé, believers sing, “The big rocks, Jesus uprooted them.” According to one person, this means that Jesus has driven out strong demons, but it is also possible that it means Jesus has destroyed fetish worship or idolatry.

In light of these observations, it is clear translators in African contexts are faced with an important question: Can the word “rock” be used in a metaphorical sense to refer to Yahweh, for example, in the verses cited above?
Several pastors, especially of Baoulé origin, have responded with a firm “No!” One pastor commented “The Baoulés have a little god (represented by the rock), but this little god is definitely NOT the all-powerful God, Creator.” Indeed, in the Baoulé Bible published in 1998, the “rock” metaphor referring to God seems to have been purposely avoided in the book of Psalms. When the word “rock” occurs referring to God, translators have consistently translated “God on whom I lean,” as in the rendering of Ps 73:26: “the one on whom I lean, it’s you.”

In Doowaayo (Cameroon), a translator notes, “it would be hard to understand Rock as a symbol of security and use it to refer to God.” The translator suggests the possibility of replacing one metaphor by another, using a functional equivalent, sowkolunyo, “stick of traveler,” i.e., “walking stick,” also called affectionately “my companion in all circumstances.” The walking stick is a very strong symbol in Doowaayo culture, used in times of danger, for example, when crossing a flooded river, or when warding off an attack. This proposal has not yet been tried out, but it seems a possible solution to a rather complex translation problem in this language.

Even in cultures where there is a direct link between the rock and traditional African worship, however, some Christians would favor trying to retain this biblical image, introducing it as a new metaphor or “re-orienting” a current one. For some Baoulé theologians, for example, along with all its other seemingly negative connotations, the rock can be seen as a symbol of solidity and immovability. Thus, it could represent strength and resistance, or someone with an unchangeable nature. One Baoulé pastor quoted the idiomatic expression jran kele ke yeboue “be strong like a rock,” and the expression yeboue tanda, used when one is swearing to the truth of a matter. Thus, some suggest it is possible to say in Baoulé Nyamien ti min yeboue tan’nda “God is my strong rock” in a Christian context, despite its negative connotations in a non-Christian one.

One translator in Dzuun, a Mandé language spoken in Burkina Faso, notes that while “rock” refers to a place of (bloody) sacrifice, the word does have positive connotations in everyday life, as a grinding stone for flour, as a foundation of a house, etc. He thus proposes it might be possible to use the word “rock” to refer to God, perhaps with a footnote or a note in the glossary to explain that worship of good and evil spirits is not intended.

Despite its “fetish” origins, some speakers seem to be able to “look beyond” and transfer the already figurative meaning of “rock” in their culture to
another element, namely the unique and all-powerful God. They are willing to widen their worldview and transfer the positive traits of the traditional “rock” or “god” to the unique Divinity. Such a viewpoint may be motivated by a desire to remain faithful to the Scriptural text, but also by the desire to allow readers access to the biblical metaphors as they occur in the Hebrew text. Such “intrusions” into or changes in the semantic make-up of a given word and concept are very common linguistically speaking: semantic “extensions” or changes of meaning in words of all types are everyday occurrences in languages around the world. But it is clear, if Bible translators take such as a step, for example, concerning the rendering of a highly “explosive” word like “rock,” they will inevitably set in motion a semantic change in their own mother tongue, a change which, given the written nature of the Scriptures, will probably remain in effect for generations.

In some languages in Africa, a literal rendering of “rock” does not seem to pose a problem. In Gouro, for example, proverbs, songs, and names provide evidence that the notion “rock” carries semantic traits that fit the biblical use: strength, resistance, security, and permanence.\(^6\) Thus, a Gouro proverb says, “An elephant will always see you, unless you are behind a rock,” and a song in praise of a hero uses the rock metaphor extensively:

\begin{quote}
His name is golê Bl gôôwlô (Iroko, son of stone)
His father’s name is gloêgô bi (son of mountain of stone)
You can’t scare him.
You can’t be afraid when you are with him.
He is un-moveable.
And if you are near to him, you are secure.
He is stable like a mountain of rock.
\end{quote}

As mentioned above, it remains to be seen which exact semantic trait is in view in each case of the appearance of the word “rock” in the Psalms or in its other occurrences in the Bible. When it co-occurs with words like “refuge,” it seems to indicate a place to hide; but in other contexts, it may carry the meaning of stability, as in the Gouro song above.

In some African languages, hardness is equal to strength. Thus in Dida, Godié and Bete, Kru languages spoken in Côte d’Ivoire, instead of calling
God a “strong” or “hard rock,” it may be better to call him directly “strength,” though this removes the rock metaphor, one of the important praise names for God in the Psalms.

Despite the mismatch between the biblical “rock” (the Lord), and “rock” in many African languages, the idiomatic expression “having one’s feet on a rock,” does seem to be an effective metaphor, posing no problem in translation. In Woroduguk, for example, a similar metaphor appears in a woman’s song, where a woman praises her husband as a source of strength in adversity:

A big wind comes, my hand grabs a strong tree,
A big wind comes, my feet are on a hard rock.

Thus, despite the possibility of “mismatch,” there are many cases where the notion of “God as rock” will communicate effectively. This study underlines, however, the need for translators to consider not only the semantic component of key terms in their biblical contexts, but also to remain vigilant and to anticipate potential misunderstandings due to cultural backdrop. Though it is hard to imagine a Bible in Africa without the powerful metaphor and strong image, “God, my rock,” in some cultures and languages, this may indeed be a necessary choice. Referring to the All Powerful Yahweh as “my rock,” may confuse readers and immediately evoke the worship of spirits rather than God!

Other types of challenges

While theological and linguistic challenges in Africa are numerous and often complex, other important practical issues prevent millions of Africans from having access to Scripture. These problems include low literacy rates, lack of written materials in mother languages, lack of funding, and lack of qualified personnel. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, very few of the sixty Ivorian languages have a scientifically based alphabet, and those that do have only had written material for less than fifty years. For writing and reading, the majority of educated people use French, not their mother tongue. Therefore, mother tongue use needs to be promoted. To create alphabets, linguists must propose the letters and the tones needed to write the language correctly.
Even if primers and readers become available, civil unrest and wars will continue to prevent the implementation of large-scale literacy programs. Funding must be found for personnel, transportation, and printing.

One important means of making translated Scriptures available in Africa is to focus on orality. In oral cultures, programs involving hearing may be more effective (and often more economical) than reading. Thus many organizations continue to establish oral-based programs using various forms of media to make the Word of God accessible to all: radio, solar-powered Scripture “readers,” “storying,” Bible CDs, etc.⁴⁴

As for personnel needs, thankfully the African church is now awakening to its role in Bible translation, literacy, and oral communication of Scriptures. In seminars, universities, and Bible institutes across the continent, important undergraduate and graduate programs are training theologians, Bible exegetes, and translators in the areas of theology, Biblical languages, linguistics, and Bible translation principles.⁴⁵ Today Africans, rather than missionaries from the West, are assessing translation needs, making difficult exegetical decisions and finding appropriate translation solutions in their own mother tongues. Despite incredible challenges facing the African church, this is “Good News” indeed.

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¹ Christianity is, in fact, not new on the African continent; nor is Bible translation! The Septuagint, the translation of Hebrew into Greek was carried out during the third century BCE in Alexandria, Egypt. This African city remained a center of Christian reflection from the early days of Christianity, including church fathers such as Origen and Clement. Early on, Bible translation was carried out in various African languages (Ge’ez, Coptic, etc.). See Lynell Zogbo, “Bible, Jewish & Christian,” in Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, ed. Mona Baker and G. Saldanha (London & New York: Routledge, 2008).

There is a great difference between French-speaking and Portuguese-speaking African Christianity, particularly in terms of the religion taking root and especially in the production of Scriptures in mother tongue languages. French and Portuguese colonizers often banned the use of African mother tongues in schools and churches, while in British colonies, use of mother tongue was promoted. Thus, today, across Africa, Christianity and Bibles in mother tongues are not equally “distributed.”

By passing through spirits, ancestors, and “genies” God is reached, invoked, and appeased. If the first European missionaries were wary of these names for God, today’s scholars realize the importance of preserving and using the traditional names, be they generic or personal praise names.

“Genies” exist in many African worldviews. In many languages, the word has come through Arabic: jin.

In the early 1960s, missionaries were very keen to make cultural adaptations. Thus, they may have the sower in Mark planting rice or millet, using a traditional local method. The camel Jesus referred to might be an elephant, since both words refer to large animals. Nowadays, however, more care is taken to respect the historicity of the biblical text. Thus, if a word for camel is not available, translators might be more comfortable saying “how can a gigantic animal pass through the eye of a needle?” rather than suggesting that Jesus saw and spoke about elephants. In the case of the sower, translators can simply say “A sower was sowing seed,” i.e., use a broader generic term rather than use specific cultural equivalents like rice or millet, which might suggest those crops were grown at that time in Israel.


Gerrit J. Van Steenbergen, Semantics, World View and Bible Translation (Cleveland: Sun Press, 2006).

Krijn van der Jagt, Anthropological Approaches to the Interpretation of the Bible, UBS Monograph Series, No. 8 (New York: United Bible Societies, 2002).


For example, there is a clear link concerning rituals to reinstate sexual purity, as well as dietary laws.

14 Indeed, there is a continual tension as to whether key terms and expressions such as “loving-kindness” (chesed) “grace” or “son of Man” should be rendered everywhere consistently, with the same rendering, or whether these terms should be translated according to context.


16 Zogbo and Wendland, Hebrew Poetry in the Bible, 88.

17 There is a compound related to the word “mountain.” In several Mandé languages “rock” is rendered as “mountain of stone” (gôlo gô, Gouro), “hill of rock” (vô golôon, Mwan), or “stone of mountain,” jen kpa (Dzuun).

18 This latter marking has been observed along the Ivoirian coast near Sassandra. Ouattara Toua Wilson remarks on the great quantity of chicken and other animal sacrifices carried out at the waterfalls at Toussiana in Burkina Faso.

19 Basile Théodore.

20 Tomas Lelo (Angola).

21 Koffiouadi Pierre.

22 Since God is very distant, the rock is the place where invocations are made to various spirits who act as intermediaries to God.

23 Information supplied by Yao Konan, Bony Kouakou, Brou N’Gouran Patrice, and Nguessan Kouakou Kan Elisé.

24 Mandevio.

25 Kouame Koffi Albert.

26 Ouattara Wilson.

27 Bony Kouakou.

28 Rebecca Assié.

29 Nguessan Kouakou Kan Elisé.

30 Koffi Kouadio Paul and Assie N’guessan.

31 Koffi Kouadio Paul.

32 Traoré Moussa.

33 Goua Bernard.

34 M. Mandevio.
35 Koffi Kouadio Paul.
36 Kpengapse Eugène Aubert.
37 Kouadio Ngôran Noé: In French, “tiens ferme comme un rocher.” It is not known if it is the spirit or the stability of a rock that is in view here.

38 Kouamé Koffi Albert. Another Baoulé student of theology, Yao Konan, presented an interesting and extensive exegesis of the literal rendering “God is my rock”: Rocks are hiding places, so God is the place where I hide. Rocks are places of sacrifice. God is not just my rock, he sent Jesus Christ to be the real sacrifice. In the village women wash their clothes, beating them on rocks. A Christian can say “I wash my clothes on the rock; I am purified.”

39 Traore Fabé.

40 Thanks to Nene Bi Tra Albert for these excellent examples. For peoples who live in the forest, not so many years ago, elephants were an important source of meat. They were hunted and were very dangerous. The meaning of this proverb goes far beyond this context, of course: unless you are (well) protected, you are exposed to danger at any moment. Rocks have one other outstanding semantic feature in Gouro: they connote secrecy. In another song, it is said, “The rock is on its stomach, and you don’t see its inside. I have good in me you do not see.”

41 This proposition comes from Gnado Didier, a speaker of Dida.
42 Moussa Traoré.

43 Tonal languages exist in many parts of the world including China, Vietnam, and throughout Latin America. Many African languages also are tonal, meaning that words carry musical notes that distinguish their meaning. Thus in Baoulé, the word bla on a high note means “woman” but on a low note, means “Come.” In Bete, tone distinguishes “I” from “you (singular),” “we” from “you (plural),” a positive statement from a negative one, etc. Linguists must determine how, where and when to mark the tones in each language since they are an essential part of the alphabet.

44 UBS, in collaboration with Hosanna ministries, has extensive programs across Africa called “Faith Comes by Hearing.” Listening groups are formed in villages and in cities to listen to the translation of the New Testament. UBS also launched, “Radio Bible,” 365 days of Scripture readings, in various languages. Many different groups use orality as a means of telling the gospel or presenting Bible teachings.


46 See the April 2006 issue of The Bible Translator, which contains articles about translator training in Africa in French, English, and Portuguese-speaking parts of Africa.
Expository Words
What Does God Expect of Us? Micah 6-7

By Esteban Voth

Introduction

How many times has a Christian asked and continued to ask what the will of God might be for his or her life? How many books have been written that propose infallible formulas for knowing the will of God? We believe that the text presented below may help put into perspective this question that has been debated so much in Christianity. From this text of Micah, and from many others that form part of God’s revelation, we suggest that God does not propose recipes or magic formulas, but rather has given to us principles to guide us through the various and complex ways of life.

Micah is a prophet who is firmly rooted in what is known as the tradition of the prophet Isaiah. He belongs to the classical movement of the eighth century BCE. During this time God decided to intervene in the history of Israel through prophets who risked their lives proclaiming a message of God that was challenging and destabilized all comfortable reality, all that was routine and boring.

Scholars agree that Micah was a farmer. As such, this man represented the voice of a sector battered by the government of Israel settled in the city of Jerusalem. It was the voice of farmers marginalized by the power that was concentrated in an urban center. It is essential, then, to understand the prophet Micah in his social context and reality. Micah lived in a time in history when the powerful who were in the urban centers systematically usurped the wellbeing of small farmers.

Solomon, King of Israel in the tenth century BCE, had begun this process with his extensive program of re-organizing Israel, where he concentrated all the administrative power in Jerusalem. He did this through the

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establishment of administrative districts that served to control and oppress the population in general. This was achieved through the elimination of the old tribal system that had been the legacy of Moses. The vision of Moses had been abandoned, and in its place was created a “state” that developed a very effective control. This state, in turn, was characterized by its huge bureaucracy, wasteful spending, and lack of justice and compassion, particularly for the poor and helpless. Some scholars have called the period and management of Solomon the “paganization of Israel.” It was the time when there was a return to the pre-Mosaic era, characterized by an Egyptian imperialism hungry for power.

The monarchy of the time of Micah had turned its back on the peasant, showed itself totally indifferent to the needs of the poor rural people, and was little by little taking away their land. This is why Micah, in a preoccupation profoundly theological and spiritual, raises the issue of justice. That is, Micah wants people to note the profound reality of injustice legitimized and practiced by the powerful.

To better understand these realities, it is important to stop, read, and assimilate some poetic gems that Micah has left us in his text and that come before chapters six and seven of his proclamation:

**Micah 2:1-2**

Alas for those who devise wickedness
and evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance. (NRSV)

**Micah 3:1-2**

And I said:
Listen, you heads of Jacob
and rulers of the house of Israel!
Should you not know justice?—
you who hate the good and love the evil,  
who tear the skin off my people,  
and the flesh off their bones. (NRSV)

**Micah 3:8-9**

But as for me, I am filled with power,  
with the spirit of the LORD,  
and with justice and might,  
to declare to Jacob his transgression  
and to Israel his sin.  
Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob  
and chiefs of the house of Israel,  
who abhor justice  
and pervert all equity. (NRSV)

One clear thing that emerges from these poetic pieces is that Micah like Isaiah, his contemporary colleague, had this particular habit of calling things by their name. In his day, like today, there is a systematic perversion by which things are disguised and called otherwise. The true prophet does not attempt to minimize or tame the harsh realities that dehumanize human beings so much. And that is why the powers, as much yesterday as in our own time, do not want to hear when things are called what they are. That is, when injustice exists and is practiced, the prophet does not allow it to be called inefficiency. Injustice is injustice, period!

Then, from these passages that we present as background to what will be discussed in what follows, three questions emerge. These issues are somewhat difficult to digest. In other words, they may bother us, but we cannot ignore them. Somehow, the text becomes a word.

1. The poetry is addressed to the leadership of the nation. It is clear that the poetry is not aimed primarily at the people in general. It is aimed particularly at those who hold political, economic, social, and religious power: king, princes, priests, false prophets.
2. The poetry has a deep interest in economic matters. Justice has everything to do with the possibility of a decent life. To live a decent life, a human being must be able to access that which guarantees life. In the case of the farmers in Israel, they had lost access to their lands confiscated by the state.
3. Of these two, it appears that Micah makes a critique of society that is intent on ignoring and even defying the teachings of the Torah. It
is important to remember that the Torah, as normative tradition, has been the source of inspiration for Micah.

**God Enters into Judgment against Israel (6:1-2)**

In the first two verses it arises that God summons Israel in order to make a case against her. This is the famous *riv* characteristic of prophetic literature. It is a dispute based on trials in the ancient Near East that deal with a violation of an agreement (cf. Amos 3:3-8; Hos 4:1-6). In this trial, God and Israel are presented in a metaphorical court proceeding to see who is guilty of a fractured relationship, broken and painful. The premise operative in this situation is that there is something wrong, terribly wrong.

It is interesting to note in the text that the legal battle starts with a *threelfold* call to *listen* (according to the Hebrew text). There seems to be a problem of deafness in Israel. How difficult it is for us “to listen”! The triple call to listen is reflected in a *threelfold* mention of the controversy God has with his people. This can be presented in written form as follows. In this, we recognize a literary technique that the author employs to highlight the issue in the first two verses.

**Listen!**
*The complaint of the LORD*

**Listen!**
*The LORD enters into judgment*

**Pay attention!**
*The LORD has a suit against*

In a trial like this, it is typical for God to invoke nature as his witness. In this case, God called the mountains and the hills as his best witnesses. The role of the mountains is to have witnessed the original covenant. They know the history very well. They are well aware of the agreements made between God and his people Israel. Furthermore, in the worldview of the Israelites, the mountains are the foundations of the earth. From the perspective of the poet, they are eternal, immutable, and have existed since long ago. That is why God calls them as witnesses for trial. The literary purpose of convening a lawsuit is to create a dramatic setting for the audience.
What Has God Done for His People? (6:3-5)

It is surprising that in this trial, where tempers surely would normally be heated because there is betrayal, indifference, contempt, and open irresponsibility, God does not aggressively confront the people. God does not begin the trial by attacking his people, whom he had rescued from slavery in Egypt and had given a land in which to live and develop. God’s strategy is different: the question. He does not complain; he does not accuse. Quite the contrary, he asks about the complaints raised against him.

In verse 3 we have the questions. God, like a father or mother after living through a tragedy, asks: “How have I offended you?” It is also important to note that God refers to the people of Israel as “my people.” This is a vocative that expresses tenderness. In this case, it is the loving way of God wanting to renew the covenant relationship. At other moments in history, God has to say “these people,” because he is already very angry and tired. But in this court of law, God begins his case from another location and with other intentions.

Verse 4 begins with a word that sounds the same as the verb “to offend” or “to afflict.” The poet, through his immense sensitivity and ability uses a very interesting play on words. The verb “to offend” in Hebrew sounds something like heletika, whereas the verb “take, release” sounds like helitika. In fact, God is saying: “I did not offend you, I brought you up.” Through questions and then a statement, God seeks for the people to reconsider. Once again, we can enjoy and learn from a literary and rhetorical device of the poet Micah.

In verses 4-5 we have a historical account whose purpose is to transport Israel in their imagination back to their beginnings. A trio of important leaders is mentioned: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The mention of Miriam in a group like this is unusual. Subtly, the text puts Miriam as a leading figure on par with Moses and Aaron. This shows that even in a society that discriminates against women, it was possible to rescue and recognize women who exercised a role of leadership and wisdom.

This entire section has to do with the saving acts of Yahweh for his people. The poem offers Israel a memory of redemption. It was God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt, when Israel could do nothing against an empire that had all the power.

A People without Memory (6:6-7)

The change that appears beginning with verse six, and which includes also verse seven, is alarming. We have come a long way where things have
changed drastically. Everything seems to indicate that the memory is completely erased. The people go about without memory, with historical amnesia, without the slightest desire or interest in remembering and recognizing what God had done for them in the past. It is clear that people do not remember anything, and they approach God from a place of power. They come before God with a haughty attitude, with the intent to bribe, to haggle, to bargain with God over something that ultimately is not negotiable.

The first question of verse 6 must be understood in the context of what follows in this same verse and in verse 7. It is a question asked sarcastically, in a spirit of defiance. It is clear that the influence of corrupt leaders has penetrated deep in the thought and attitude of the people. Then the people challenge God and, seeking to ridicule him, say: “With what shall I approach the Lord?” This is not an innocent question; nor is it a question seeking information. It is a question that tries to provoke. And before there is the possibility of a response, the people offer a number of alternatives, always with the intention of bargaining.

When and how have we come to think that God is a God who can be bought? How did the people get to the point of considering they had the right to challenge God with a dirty bribe? Perhaps, one comes to that point when one forgets the memory of the Exodus. The circumstances become conducive to such an aberration when one does not remember who God really is and all that God has done throughout history for humankind. It is in this state of “memory-erasure” that everything can be reduced to a product, a commodity, a negotiable object. Even our most precious child can become an instrument in the service of a corrupt agreement. Any intrinsic value is lost when one forgets the original story.

To conclude this section, it is important to note the stark contrast between the poetry of verses 3-5 and that of verses 6-7. The two poems articulate two completely opposite views of justice. In the poem of verses 3-5, the memory of the Exodus creates an attitude and a context of mutual gratitude and delivery. It is in that place, and from memory, that redemption and liberation become a concrete reality. In contrast, in the poem of verses 6-7, we find a calculating attitude, ready to bribe and even to deliver the firstborn, all in order to twist the arm of God.

**What Does God Expect of Us? (6:8)**

Faced with this reality of the people, the people’s answer to the question so proud and haughty, “With what shall I approach the Lord?” is given in
solemn and universal terms. The answer given by God somehow ignores the question. In fact, the reply does not attempt to directly answer the mocking and sarcastic question. Quite the contrary, God makes one of his most significant statements; this has much more to do with the quality of life to be lived.

The three elements are well known, however: do justice, love loyalty, and walk humbly with God. What does this mean? Of course, we wish to reiterate that these are not recipes or magic formulas. Nor are they matters that we must do as robots, and that in “doing them” we are fulfilling what God expects of us. We suggest in principle that this has much more to do with living a life faithful to God, which in turn will make us more human and thus better reflect the image of God given to each human being by the Creator of all things.

Conclusion

What does God expect of us? The text of Micah is very clear, yet at the same time we suggest that in answering this call of God to do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly, we must start with a new insight into who God is. This slightly different understanding shows us a God who delights in acts of solidarity. That is, biblical justice begins by understanding that God is a God who loves justice and solidarity.

If we look closely at the last part of chapter 6, we will see that the issue of most concern to God is the absence, the lack of justice. Solidarity with God’s justice does not permit, does not accept, does not tolerate these situations of corruption that affect so much the weakest members of society. When God declares what is good for humans, he is doing it from this context and from this raw and painful reality. God does not pose something to human beings from a vacuum or from a philosophical theory developed in an ivory tower. He does it from a reality full of injustice and lack of solidarity. This is why that which is stated in verse eight becomes so important.

The situation does not improve at all when we reach the last chapter of this book. If we look carefully at the first part, particularly the first seven verses, we discover that in addition to a lack of justice, there is a total lack of loyalty (chesed). In the last verses of chapter seven, we learn of a compassionate God whose compassion is described in maternal terms. Hope made possible through a life of solidarity is seen to be enriched by a predisposition of God for forgiveness and rebuilding of damaged relationships. This is ultimately what can heal those broken family relationships that have produced such deep wounds. The justice of God is caring and compassionate, and this it is
active, not passive. We suggest that this new understanding of God can inspire us to live, practice, and do justice.


2 Ibid.
Second Corinthians 8:4 and 9:1 and the Larger Context of Paul’s Letters

by Roger L. Omanson

Introduction

Older, literal translations almost always render the Greek τούς ἀγίους, in 2 Cor 8:4 and 9:1 as “the saints.” Some functional equivalent translations (i.e., translations that give priority to expressing clearly the meaning instead of the form of the original) render τούς ἀγίους as “God’s people” (GNB, REB). This is helpful, since in contemporary English the word “saint” refers to someone of exceptional moral virtue, which is not what Paul meant. But in this specific context in 2 Corinthians, “God’s people” does not go far enough, as will be explained below.

Context of 2 Corinthians 8-9

Second Corinthians 8:4 and 9:1 read as follows respectively:

8.4 μετὰ πολλῆς παρακλήσεως δεόμενοι ἡμῶν τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν τῆς διακονίας τῆς εἰς τούς ἀγίους, (literally: “with much appeal begging us the grace and the fellowship of the ministry which is to the saints” //“begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints”—NRSV)

9.1 Περὶ μὲν γὰρ τῆς διακονίας τῆς εἰς τούς ἀγίους περισσόν μοί ἐστὶν τὸ γράφειν ὑμῖν: (literally: Now regarding the ministry to the saints, unnecessary for me is the need to write to you” //“Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints”—NRSV)

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There are numerous exegetical issues in these two verses. How, for example, should the nouns χάριν, κοινονίαν, and διακονίας be translated here? These are important questions for translators; in this article, however, the focus is on the meaning and translation of the words τοῦς ἀγίους.

The correct exegesis of these two verses in 2 Corinthians involves the larger context of Paul’s letters to Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Romans. So let us take these writings in chronological order, beginning with Galatians.

In Gal 2:10, Paul states that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem asked him to “remember the poor.” Most likely this is what Paul did when he organized the collection among his Gentile churches for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Next, one reads in 1 Cor 16:1-4 that Paul has instructed churches in Galatia and in Corinth to set aside money for this collection. At this point, Paul is not sure whether he himself will go with the collection to Jerusalem or simply send others who have been approved “by letters.” Paul, being Paul, adds, however, “If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me” (italics added).

A little later, when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he refers to the collection as “this ministry to the saints” (8:4) and “the ministry to the saints” (9:1). Not long after this, Paul writes to the churches in Rome, stating “At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom 16:25-26). As the next verse makes clear, Paul sees the collection as symbolizing the unity between Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Gentile Christians among whom he has been working.

As Matera has stated, “Paul seems to have attached a significance to the collection that the church at Jerusalem did not; namely, the monetary gift of the Gentiles would demonstrate their solidarity with the Jewish-Christian mother church of Jerusalem, and conversely, the solidarity of that church with them.”

With this background clearly established, one can see that the words “the saints” in 2 Cor 8:4 and 9:1 are an abbreviation for the expression εἰς τοὺς πνευματικούς τῶν ἀγίων τῶν ἐν Ἰερουσαλήμ. This is why the general expression “God’s people” is inadequate here. Readers who are not familiar with all of Paul’s writings in the New Testament will almost certainly not realize that “the saints” has a very specific reference here.

An exegetical issue that must be decided before one can translate Rom 15:26 is whether the genitive phrase τῶν ἀγίων should be understood as epexegetical or as partitive. If the former (epexegetical), the rendering becomes “unto the poor who are the saints at Jerusalem.” If the latter (partitive), the
rendering becomes “unto the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.” This is a crucial exegetical matter in this verse, but a decision is not necessary for the broader purpose of this article. What is important here is that Paul is referring to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, either to the whole church (epexegetical genitive) or to a part of this church (partitive genitive).

The ultimate significance of this collection, beyond even the symbolic unity of the church, is also of considerable importance for understanding Paul’s theology. In all probability, Johannes Munck was correct in seeing that the offering for the saints in Jerusalem symbolized the arrival of the last days in which the eschatological time of peace would begin with gifts being brought to Jerusalem from Gentile converts (see Isa 2:2-3 and Mic 4:1-2).

**Translations of 2 Corinthians 8:4 and 9:1**

**The Saints**

Literal translations of 1 Cor 8:4 and 9:1 say “the saints,” as illustrated by the following translation of 1 Cor 9:1:

- Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints (NRSV).

**God’s People**

Others say something like “God’s people,” as the following three translations demonstrate:

- They even asked and begged us to let them have the joy of giving their money for God’s people (8:4; CEV).
- About this aid for God’s people, it is superfluous for me to write to you (9:1; REB).
- I don’t need to write you about the money you plan to give for God’s people (9:1; CEV).

...in Judea / in Jerusalem

A number of modern translations go further in these two verses in 2 Corinthians and identify the “saints” as those Christians living in Jerusalem or Judea.
They begged us and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping God’s people in Judea (8:4; GNB).

They begged us again and again for the gracious privilege of sharing in the gift for the Christians in Jerusalem (8:4; NLT).

There is really no need for me to write you about the help being sent to God’s people in Judea (9:1; GNB).

I really don’t need to write to you about this gift for the Christians in Jerusalem (9:1; NLT).

Note, however, that none of these translations, which makes explicit that the “saints,” or “God’s people,” were in Jerusalem or Judea makes explicit that these were Jewish Christians. A simple translation such as “God’s people” “may be misunderstood to mean ‘the [non-Christian] Jewish people’ or ‘Christians in general’ (including Gentile Christians). Translators may need to be more precise: “the Jewish Christians.” This element is crucial to Paul’s whole mission. I, therefore, propose the following translations:

**Proposed translations**

2 Corinthians 8:4

- They begged us and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem,
- or
- They begged us and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping the poor among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

2 Corinthians 9:1

- There is really no need for me to write to you about the help being sent to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem,
- or
- There is really no need for me to write to you about the need being sent to the poor among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

**Conclusion**

The main point of this article has been that certain verses must be understood in the larger context in which they occur. The larger context may consist of
a single chapter in which a verse occurs. Alternatively, it may consist of the entire book in which a verse occurs, or it may consist of several books. The larger context may also include the biblical world, which is known through historical and archaeological study. Pastors and other students of the Bible can benefit in their study by using a number of modern translations also since some of these translations express the meaning more clearly than some of the traditional translations such as the KJV or the RSV do.

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1 See Nils Alstrup Dahl, Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 37-38. Dahl shows that Paul used various terms and circumlocutions such as κοινωνία, διακοινία, χάρις, ἐνδείξιν τῆς ἀγάπης, ἔργον ἀγαθόν, and λογεῖου, which all refer to the collection in the specific context of these verses in 1-2 Corinthians.


5 See, however, the discussion by Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 89-91, who concludes that the Greek phrase is “a description of a group within the Jerusalem church who had urgent material needs.” Similarly, Fitzmyer, Romans, 722.


8 Hence the value of reference works such as the multi-volume Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).
Words about Recent Books
I. Biblical Studies


When I saw the volume *Judges* of the Word Biblical Commentary by Trent Butler available for review, I jumped on it. The WBC series is an incredibly well done academic and critical commentary series and Butler has previously written a wonderful volume on *Joshua*. As an Old Testament professor, I have had trouble finding a good academic commentary on the book of Judges that I can use with second year Biblical Hebrew students, one that addresses critical and textual issues in the original language while considering the theological implications of the text. This volume does not disappoint and delivers in every respect.

Like other volumes in this commentary series, *Judges* begins with background information, such as history, dating, chronology, narrative composition, outline, and an extensive bibliography. The commentary section follows the usual WBC formatting, with each pericope having its own bibliography, author’s translation, notes, form/structure setting, comment, and explanation. The notes section includes many variant textual readings, especially from the Septuagint. When Butler includes original language words and phrases (Hebrew text, and Greek when citing the Septuagint) in the notes and comment sections, he includes an English translation so they will prove useful to readers ranging from the Hebrew grammarian to the informed lay leader. In the explanation section, Butler gives theological nuggets that will prove meaningful to scholars and pastors alike. Also, Butler includes two excursuses in the middle of his commentary; they are attributes of the two Deborah stories and the nature of Old Testament narrative. Both of these are insightful and they will prove helpful to the reader.

Butler ends his book with an Appendix of Tables. This section has a collection of twenty-six tables and a map, which mostly addresses textual and structural issues (such as comparisons of Judges and Joshua, narrative and genre comparisons for various chapters, thematic
inconsistencies, dating, Israelite failures, and structural formulas). These charts will prove helpful to the academic community in doing critical studies on Judges. I was especially happy to see charts comparing Judges with the book of Joshua and charts giving Hebrew phrases related to textual issues. The map identifies locations associated with various judges.

Overall, Butler has written a great volume on the book of Judges. The book is well researched and it reflects Butler’s critical thought on the text. The introduction material will assist the reader in understanding the setting of the book as well as various technical issues. The commentary section is well-balanced, looking at technical issues and considering the bigger picture of the stories, and offers something for the expert and non-specialist alike. I highly recommend this volume to scholars, seminary students, and pastors and I am pleased to add it to my personal library.

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Central to Christianity, the Pauline letters are rife with difficult concepts and depictions for contemporary readers, with the result that many passages have come to be regarded as “mere” metaphor. Indeed, we ministers and theologians often encourage the interpretation of the central tropes of “being-in-Christ,” “the pneuma of Christ/God” or “the body of Christ” as simply metaphorical or symbolic concepts, placing them more easily within contemporary rational thought. However, Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit challenges our traditional metaphoric readings, insisting that a proper understanding of Paul’s cosmology necessitates a far more difficult, literal reading profoundly influenced by Stoic materialism.

Following an approach that he calls “philosophical exegesis,” Troels Engberg-Pedersen begins with a succinct presentation of Stoic thought. Sculpting this depiction as a lens for 1 Corinthians 15, Engberg-Pedersen applies the figure of pneuma in Stoic cosmology to the Corinthian text’s eschatological vision, painting a remarkably vibrant picture in which the materialistic pneuma emerges as the most fitting
reading for the passage’s references to the body. Following this particular analysis, Engberg-Pedersen carries the materialistic understanding of the pneuma to the wider spectrum of Pauline thought. Specifically holding in tension the pneuma’s cognitive and physical qualities in relation to the present, he engages questions relating to the ongoing life of the Christian, the figure of Christ, and the mechanics of the “pneumatic” Christian.

At this juncture of the argument, Engberg-Pedersen turns to potentially problematic elements of Pauline thought for this lens, beginning with physical, cognitive, and superhuman aspects of the Pauline universe. While admitting some tension between the Pauline elements emerging from Jewish apocalypticism and Hellenistic Stoicism, he argues that Paul’s cognitive understanding of the pneuma encompasses both Paul’s physical and personal ways of speaking, such that they reveal Paul’s notion of self as both necessarily material and cognitive. Following general cosmological issues, he brings forward the second major question of this lens in the book’s fourth chapter: that of preserving both divine and human agency. Balanced on the element of cognition detailed in the figure of the pneuma, he provides an incisive exposition of how human and divine agencies are, in fact, upheld with this materialistic reading.

Having made the case for a Stoic lens and exhibited its avoidance of various problems, Engberg-Pedersen then transitions to an analysis of the Pauline text itself, offering a discussion of the text at three levels: Paul’s own conversion confessions, his moral exhortations, and the very letter writing paradigm itself. Here, he invokes Foucault’s “subjectification” and Bourdieu’s “habitus” to exhibit the genius of the Pauline-Stoic paradigm as it wove together Hellenistic thought and Jewish apocalypticism.

Advocating a technical corrective via materialistic and monistic Stoic cosmology, Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul seems intended predominantly for scholars, although ministers may find value in its Pauline readings. Engberg-Pedersen’s analysis portrays the typical metaphoric readings of Pauline references to the body as a mistaken incorporation of immaterialistic and dualistic Middle Platonism as Paul’s dominant cosmological paradigm. While this argument is perhaps voiced most profoundly in his reading of 1 Corinthians 15, one question that arises from the text is to what extent Engberg-Pedersen can make the second movement of his argument: Can one follow Engberg-Pedersen in assuming a systematic nature to the whole of Pauline thought? While scholars will no doubt discuss this aspect of the presentation, the deftness of his
particular analyses indeed confronts readers with a difficult yet moving interpretation of the apostle Paul. Read as an interpretive lens, it exposes a vibrant understanding of the Pauline tropes of “being in Christ” or “possessed by Christ’s pneuma,” or being part of the “body of Christ.”

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Flemming’s commentary is the newest installment in the NBBC series. The series attempts to provide scholarly and also readable studies of Scripture for scholars, pastors, students and laity. While the NIV is the main translation, each author is free to provide his/her own rendering at key junctures of the biblical text for the reader.

Flemming is very traditional in his approach and interpretation of Philippians. For example, the commentary works on the principle that the Acts of the Apostles is a viable source for interpreting the letters of Paul, a position that does not have universal adherence among NT scholars. To his credit, Flemming provides an example of how one might employ Acts responsibly for these purposes. Secondly, against those who argue that Philippians is really two or three letters, Flemming argues that manuscript evidence, a coherent structure, the presence of key terms throughout the book as it is, as well as other factors, indicate a unified document that reflects Paul’s life setting. Finally, Flemming takes the position that Paul wrote Philippians from prison in Rome. By contrast, Roetzel, for example, argues that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus when he wrote Philippians (C. J. Roetzel, The Letters of Paul, fifth ed., Westminster John Knox, 2009, p. 122; cf. G. W. Hansen, The Letter to the Philippians, Eerdmans, 2009, 19-25).

This is a clearly written commentary which engages a wide range of exegetical positions and options. Each section covers background, the text itself and implications of the passage for contemporary living. This is a fine commentary for exegetical seminary courses in concert with commentaries from other perspectives. It should also prove helpful for pastors and students and should be especially helpful for preaching and teaching.

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Richard A. Horsley’s introduction to this fine collection of essays clearly grounds the scholarship with a concern for contemporary ethics. While his claim that “most Americans think of themselves as a biblical people” (p. 1) may be overstated, Horsley clearly traces the influence of biblical ideals from the founding of the nation, through the history of the United States, and even into contemporary political and economic decision-making. Moreover, Horsley astutely recognizes that the biblical materials are “not unanimously and unambiguously anti-imperial or pro-imperial. They speak with different and sometimes ambivalent voices” (p. 7).

The volume begins with Norman K. Gottwald’s discussion of the formation of ancient Israel as an anti-imperial response to Egyptian rule. Walter Brueggemann follows with a survey of faith responses to Assyrian power in the historical narratives and prophetic material. Jon L. Berquist concludes the reflections on the Old Testament with a very clear and thorough presentation of life in Judea under the influence of the Persian Empire.

John Dominic Crossan introduces the New Testament responses to empire by discussing what he calls Roman imperial theology, which was “the ideological glue that held Roman civilization together” (p. 59). Crossan adds that the Romans executed Jesus for “nonviolent revolution against their imperial power,” a power substantiated by the Caesars’ claims of divine status (p. 73). Horsley follows this contextual essay with a more detailed description of how Jesus’ mission stood in direct opposition to Roman imperialism. The book concludes with Neil Elliott’s assessment of Pauline eschatology as a response to Roman imperialism, Warren Carter’s discussion of the Gospel of Matthew, Brigitte Kahl’s treatment of Acts, and Greg Carey’s reading of the book of Revelation as “a counter-imperial script” in light of imperial persecution.

The major strength of this volume is that it provides its readers with very relevant historical and sociological data that aids in interpreting the biblical material’s response to empire. The essays by Berquist and Crossan do this the best, systematically describing the Persian and Roman imperial systems, respectively. Each essay also addresses the potential impact of this
historical context on biblical interpretation and the application of biblical principles of resistance to empire in modern political and economic debates.

There are, however, some major lacunae in the volume as a whole, especially regarding the Old Testament material. While Brueggemann briefly surveys the Assyrian empire and Berquist mentions the Babylonians, a more thorough treatment of the Babylonians and the Babylonian exile is necessary. Additionally, an essay on the influence of the Greek control between the Persian and Roman empires would have helped readers understand the impact of Hellenism during the Second Temple period.

These gaps notwithstanding, Horsley and the rest of the contributors give modern adherents to the biblical tradition a good deal of information that will help them interpret the biblical response to empire. More importantly, this volume will help Christians recognize when we need to incorporate the tradition of prophetic resistance when the human tendency towards imperialism presents itself in contemporary society.

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*The Old Testament between Theology and History: A Critical Survey*, by Niels Peter Lemche. Louisville:

In *The Old Testament between Theology and History*, Lemche, a leading representative of the “Copenhagen School,” presents a compendious demonstration of a central tenant of the movement, namely that the nineteenth century shift in biblical studies from an interest in the Bible as story to the Bible as history must be reversed if the Bible, specifically the Old Testament, is to be read theologically. Lemche grounds this assertion in a fundamental critique of the Bible as historiography in the modern sense. Noting that Old Testament scholarship reconstructs much of ancient Israel’s history based solely on scriptures, that is, without the corroboration required by the canons of contemporary historiography, and thus engage essentially in circular reasoning. Further, he accounts for the diversity in scholarly reconstructions in terms of the varied backgrounds and perspectives of scholarly readers of the Old Testament. Indeed, the Old Testament itself, he concludes, represents a narrative of Israel’s history created by the biblical authors; it is a “constructed history” written in and
for the Jewish Diaspora. One by-product of historical criticism, in Lemche’s view, has been to virtually sever the Old Testament from the Christian canon. Instead of such historical-critical approaches to Scripture, specifically to the Old Testament, Lemche advocates a return to story: “The theological study of the Old Testament is the study of literature” (p. 350).

The study is laid out in a very logical and easy to follow format. After a synopsis of the Old Testament, the author presents his case for skepticism with regard to the value of the Old Testament as a primary historical source. He discusses the (lack of) archaeological evidence that would substantiate the biblical picture of Israel’s history. He takes pains to compare Old Testament literature and the literary heritage of Israel’s neighboring civilizations. Along the way, he pays particular attention to the methods of historical-criticism, their development, and their typical conclusions concerning the dates, authorship, and contexts of biblical literature.

Apart from its independent value as a history of Old Testament scholarship and a survey of its major results, Lemche’s work calls attention to a central problem for contemporary theology, namely, the nature of biblical authority and its truth claims. Ironically, Lemche’s radical skepticism regarding the value of the Old Testament as a historical source is tantamount simultaneously to a call for a return to pre-critical readings of Scripture and to a proposal for a post-modern sociology of knowledge. If, as Lemche advocates, the Old Testament, indeed the whole canon of Christian Scriptures, is the “story” of a people, authoritative for that people solely because it is their story, how is it relevant to someone outside the tradition?

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James L. Resseguie writes a narrative commentary that examines Revelation as a literary whole with a beginning, a middle and an ending. The book “flows from chapter to chapter, looking ahead and looking back” through its symbolism, plot and characters (p. 7). He also attempts to identify the writer’s theological/ideological viewpoint.
The Introduction discusses rhetorical dimensions, setting, characters, point of view, plot, narrator, reader and structure. Resseguie then reads Revelation using these tools.

Resseguie takes some positions that will invite debate. For example, he argues that John’s poor grammatical constructions exist “because John wants it to be difficult” in order “to force the reader and listener to pay attention” (p. 48). This is highly unlikely for two reasons. First and foremost, Revelation does not display any evidence that John possessed any better writing skill in Greek than what we have. Second, many have argued persuasively that the text exhibits a Semitic writing style indicative of someone thinking in a Semitic language and writing in Greek. Anyone uncomfortable with writing in a second language knows this too well.

Resseguie also favors a linear literary progression theory over a recapitulation theory on the structure of the book (pp. 54-59). This should come as no surprise from a narrative critic. He correctly distinguishes between chronological progression and literary progression. This is a definite strength of the study. However, Revelation displays both literary progression and recapitulation. Pablo Richard has conclusively demonstrated how the numbered visions recapitulate one another while maintaining a linear progression (P. Richard, Apocalypse: A People’s Commentary on the Book of Revelation [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995]). Finally, Resseguie makes no argument concerning the date and social context of the book of Revelation, making it possible to read the book in a vacuum and replace John’s context with one’s own.

This commentary is well written and researched. While it has some nuanced readings that are distinctive, as do most commentaries, the results are not terribly different from more traditional historical-critical commentaries. If one is searching for a new perspective and approach to supplement others, this study will neither be so far afield as to feel alien nor so similar as to seem stale. New Testament professors, many pastors and seminarians will find this work helpful.

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Anthony Thiselton is currently Professor of Christian Theology at the University of Nottingham. Thiselton has written extensively in the area of hermeneutics and its application to the interpretation of the Bible, and is a practitioner of biblical hermeneutics as well (e.g., his exhaustive treatment of 1 Corinthians in the NIGTC series). This text thus represents a compendium of years of fruitful research and practice in this field.

In the opening chapters Thiselton lays the groundwork for what follows. Here he compares hermeneutics to philosophy, arguing that hermeneutics regards texts as “active” subjects which exert an influence on the interpreter, thus placing the interpreter squarely within the hermeneutical circle/spiral. Another major difference between philosophical hermeneutics and philosophical thinking in general is that hermeneutics generally takes place within a community, and must take into consideration the historical context in which the text in question was composed. Thiselton also argues that an interpreter (to some degree) can and should attempt to discover the original intent of the author of the text.

After a chapter that amounts to a brief history of parable research and serves as a demonstration of various interpretive approaches to the parables, Thiselton moves to the heart of his book. The chapters that follow chronicle the history of interpretation of the Bible and hermeneutics in general. For his starting point, Thiselton appropriately begins with the interpretive methods evinced within ancient Judaism, as well as by the Stoics. From here, he moves into the use of the OT by NT writers, and continues his survey throughout the centuries until he arrives in the twenty-first century. Along the way he makes various stops, focusing on significant figures such as Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Barth, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. The final chapter of the survey is concerned with the contribution of postmodernism to the field of hermeneutics.

Thus the book’s greatest strength is also one of its weaknesses. Thiselton provides a grand overview of the history of hermeneutics, displaying his vast knowledge of the field and its major contributors. Through this text the reader is exposed to an excellent synopsis of the history and current state of research in this area. But because the book attempts to cover so much ground, it is easy to feel like one is being rushed through the various phases of the history of hermeneutics research. Even in those areas in which Thiselton slows down in order to concentrate on a significant figure or period, one has the sense that there
is much more to the story that is necessary to gain an adequate understanding. Perhaps it is simply Thiselton’s style, but this reviewer often had the impression that this book was the result of the considerable editing of a much more comprehensive volume. Another potential reason for this impression is Thiselton’s oft-stated desire not to repeat what he has already stated in another of his books.

This book represents an excellent introduction to the theory of hermeneutics. The extensive bibliography and “Recommended Initial Reading” lists at the end of each chapter will guide the reader to the further resources needed to unpack what Thiselton has introduced. It is not, however, a “how-to” guide for practicing biblical interpretation (a claim, to be fair, which it does not make). Were this text to be used, for example, in a seminary class on hermeneutics, it would need to be supplemented with a text that more fully demonstrates the various hermeneutical approaches that Thiselton so helpfully introduces.

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II. Historical-Theological Studies


This volume tries to update the monumental work of William Warren Sweet’s Religion on the American Frontier published more than sixty years ago. It seems to be a compromise for those who wish for updated individual denominational histories over against publishers who realize there is limited interest in academia or American culture for books that are designed for specific audiences.

The editor is optimistic about the future of denominationalism in America and hopes this volume will lead to a synthesis “of religious authority as it relates to denominational structure and community.” As such the volume provides a good source for “updating” as individual authors discuss specific features in the past and present situation of Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Black Protestants, Mormons, and Pentecostals. Unfortunately, in the discussion of Baptist historiography Parker has left out the work of an important scholar, Walter B. Shurden, who has written extensively and who is widely recognized as an authority in the field in Baptist circles.

This reviewer wonders why the word “historiography” was not included in the title, as the essays illuminate the trends of each group and how historians have treated them. As one who has taught and lived within the cocoon of denominational life for more than four decades, I am not as optimistic about the future of denominationalism. Sociological and demographic studies of American Christianity during the last decade indicate that denominations are declining in numbers and their structures are not meeting the demands of twenty-first century churchlife. A considerable number of “networks” are competing with denominations as pastors and laity in the churches attempt to reinterpret and renew what they believe is Missio Dei.
In addition, the literature for Christian education that is available to churches has left the boundaries of monopolistic denominational publishing houses. This trend is witnessed by the abundance of materials available online and by the diminishing loyalty of Sunday school teachers to denominational literature, who are instead turning to materials more akin to twenty-first-century modalities.

Added to the above, publications of in-depth studies like this book by university presses are slower and expensive to publish. It may take a book from one to two years to be published after its conception and writing. One wonders about their relevance or the importance beyond the academic community.

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III. Ministerial Studies


When I was first asked to teach an introductory class on Christian worship to divinity school students, I was surprised by the lack of a reliable introductory textbook that was also recent and reflected an awareness of the diversity that exists in Christian worship today. Although we were still using the text by Franklin Segler, which had been helpfully updated by Randall Bradley, it just did not feel like it fit the contexts into which I knew my students would be going.

The next year Gail Ramshaw’s _Christian Worship: 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals_ appeared, and I wished that it had been available at the time I was teaching. This work is much more up-to-date than Segler’s and seems to do a better job of setting worship practices in their historical context, and doing so in a manner that appreciates the variety of worship forms that exist today. Yet, despite these helpful features, Ramshaw’s attractive and useful work seemed to be much better used as a handbook for understanding worship as a phenomenon than as a practical guide for actual worship leaders on the front line in the local congregation.

The several works by the late Robert Webber also provide a helpful theoretical foundation for worship leaders, which certainly assist their understanding of what they ought to be trying to achieve in worship, both biblically and theologically. Unfortunately, Webber’s most recent offerings seem to delve more deeply into foundational concepts and offer less practical how-to advice than some of his earlier works did, which now seem out of date.

With the appearance of _The Worship Architect_, however, my search for a practical handbook has ended, at least for the time being. Although the forms and methods of Christian worship remain in flux these days, this book by Constance Cherry brings together theory and practice in a helpful and accessible
form. Her professional and personal connection to Webber is evident in the book, which means that she is writing on a solid theological foundation. However, her own unique contribution to the task is evident both in content and in her choice to employ an architectural model as a structural metaphor for the work.

Cherry lays out in five “phases” a worship planning model that is much like the one an architect might use in the creation of a physical structure. The first phase is the theological foundation, which includes a review of the biblical basis for worship. In the second phase, Cherry describes the four “load bearing” walls that need to be erected for any worship event to be able to stand. Here we find the influence of Webber regarding the four major movements of worship: gathering, the Word, the Table, and sending forth.

The third and fourth phases address questions of how to add the appropriate appointments to a worship event so as to enrich it and allow all of its parts and pieces to function together. The fifth phase adds a helpful pastoral care aspect to the larger picture of worship planning by helping the worship leader to engage worshipers as a people, rather than objects, and offering guidance as to how to involve them more fully in the worship event.

The helpfulness of the text is increased by the addition of up-to-date bibliography and hints on how to use the book in worship planning meetings with congregational staff or leadership teams. Even though worship will continue to change as the years go by, and Cherry’s book may quickly go out of date, for now at least, it seems that we have in this text a useful, practical guide that makes a valuable addition to the work of Ramshaw and others.

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Over the past 20 years, Christian scholars have renewed the conversation about the place that faith plays in the life of higher
education. This collection of essays is the result of a conference in 2004 at Baylor University that is a part of this ongoing conversation.

The essays are organized into two major sections. Part 1 is entitled “Basic Issues” and addresses the unique features of Christian intellectual community. Richard Hays offers the wisdom of I John as a framework for Christian intellectual community. He presents a picture of the Christian university as a community that acts with love and humility in its pursuit of truth. Jean Bethke Elshtain continues this theme by exploring the value of a reasoned faith that is engaged in respectful and open dialogue with a variety of interlocutors. John Polkinghorne’s essay “Christian Interdisciplinary” addresses the centrality of theology as the unifying discipline for all intellectual pursuits of the academy. Joel Carpenter argues for the importance of growing global awareness in Christian scholarship as Christian faith and intellectual life flourish outside of the traditionally Christian West. David Lyle Jeffrey identifies definitive marks of a Christian university including a Christian faculty and the centrality of theology in the intellectual life of the university community.

Part 2 is entitled “Vital Practices” and addresses ways in which the Christian identity of a university is interpreted into the life and discipline of intellectual activity. In her essay on literary hermeneutics, Susan Felch argues for the value of delight as a Christian interpretive principle over that of doubt that is characteristic of much university learning. Aurelie Hagstrom’s insightful essay “Christian Hospitality in the Intellectual Community” describes important aspects of hospitality as essential to Christian intellectual life. She contrasts hospitality with tolerance in an effort to demonstrate the importance of this value as it relates to issues of diversity and academic freedom. Steven Harmon argues for the value of both intellectual disagreement and common worship within a Christian intellectual community. Daniel Russ and Mark I. Sargent discuss the responsibility of Christian universities to shape the moral imagination of their students for more creative and active civic engagement. In the final essay, Daniel H. Williams argues for a renewed emphasis on confessionalism and its support of a robust understanding of vocation as Christian universities move into the mainstream of academic institutions in the United States.

The diverse authors in this volume share a common commitment to the centrality of Christian intellectual community within the academy. As Christian scholars continue to reflect about the defining marks of a Christian university and the role of Christian
scholars in the larger academic community, this book will prove to be a helpful resource. Anyone associated with a Christian university and committed to maintaining fidelity to a Christian vision of higher education would be enriched by this collection of essays.

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