

More than Words:

4 Bible Translation Basics Every Christian Should Know

by Ron Krueger

An elderly woman learned of the many language groups in our world without Bibles in their languages. She had no training, but was eager to help, so she asked for a dictionary of one of the languages so she could go to work to translate the Bible herself!

If only the task were that straightforward! As well-meaning as this woman was, she was quite unaware of what she'd be getting into. The complexities and challenges are many. I've spent my career as a missionary and Bible translation consultant working primarily in the Philippines, and I can testify to the fact that translators spend as much time on their knees as at their desks!

Bible translation matters. Even a single word can change how we understand the Bible. Important questions, including over women's leadership in the church and home, often hinge on translation issues. We don't all need to be translation experts, but a basic understanding of Bible translation concepts helps us judge whether the arguments we hear are valid.

It's my hope that these principles will help us all better appreciate

the challenge of translation and approach gender (and other) debates with knowledge and humility.¹

1. The building blocks

Languages

Most Christians know the Bible was not written in English. The writings we find in our Bibles were written in a few languages—ancient Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic (a few parts of the Old Testament, including the book of Daniel), and Greek (the New Testament). Specifically, Koine (meaning “common”) Greek. Koine Greek was spoken all over the Mediterranean and Middle East during the time of the New Testament.

Source material

A translator needs something to translate. We have none of the original documents that make up our Bible. Fortunately, though, they were copied many, many times, so we almost always know what the originals said. But not always, and not without debates. What if a scribe

Jesus would've known Koine Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. He probably spoke Aramaic in his daily life, and would've used Hebrew and Greek in particular settings.² This means that most of Jesus' words in the Greek New Testament were themselves translated from Aramaic to Greek.

Though the Old Testament was written in Hebrew (based on oral tradition), it was translated into Koine Greek even before Jesus was born. This translation was done by seventy scholars, and is called the Septuagint (often abbreviated LXX), from the Latin word *septuaginta*, meaning “seventy.” New Testament writers often quote the Septuagint rather than the original Hebrew texts.



made a mistake while copying a text? Or added a comment that someone else later inserted into the text? Mark 16:9–20 is an example of text that was added to the original.

Translation approaches

Two major approaches to translation are called “literal” and “idiomatic” (also known by terms like “dynamic,” “dynamic equivalence,” or “meaning-based”). Literal translations try to keep the linguistic forms of the original Hebrew and Greek texts as much as possible. Idiomatic translations favor the forms of the target language. There are few, if any, translations that are completely literal or completely idiomatic.³ Most fall somewhere on a continuum between these two, and they all try to communicate the meaning the authors intended.

People often ask which approach is best. The answer is neither, though they have different strengths. An idiomatic approach will likely be clearer for someone encountering the Bible for the first time, but a literal approach might make it easier to do a word study.

2. Translation can’t (and shouldn’t) always be literal

Does the phrase, “They returned not height” mean anything to you? I’m guessing not, but it’s in the Bible. This is the literal translation of the opening phrase of Hosea 7:16.

If you were to look up this passage in your Bible, you’d see something like this:

- They do not turn to the Most High (NIV)
- They return, but not upward (ESV)
- They turn to that which does not profit (NRSV)
- They turn to Baal (RSV)

We often dream of a “pure” translation, free of the influence of a translator’s interpretation. But as examples like this show, it’s not so easy. Sometimes, in order to simply write a coherent sentence in English, much less communicate meaning, a translator has to go beyond the plain text.

Even when a literal translation is possible, it can be misleading.

Gender Connection: Source Material

Source material connects to gender in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, where Paul says that women should be silent. Scholars debate whether this command was actually part of Paul’s letter. Some say it was, but others say that markings on the earliest manuscripts show it was added in by a scribe who was copying the letter. We may never know for sure, but it’s good to be aware that this key command might not have come from Paul! This isn’t technically a translation issue, but it impacts translation.

For more, see Philip Payne’s book, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*.

Gender Connection: Inclusive Language

You may have heard arguments over gender-inclusive or gender-accurate Bible translations. Greek uses masculine terms to describe groups of people that include male and female. So while the Greek may “literally” say “a man” or “brothers,” often it means “a person” or “brothers and sisters.” The context of the passage helps us know what is meant. English has traditionally done the same, using “man” to mean “human,” but this is changing as culture changes. Even some literal translations are now becoming “gender-accurate.”⁵

Gender Connection: “Head” in Ephesians 5

Body parts play an important role in the apostle Paul’s writings. One body part in particular, the head, comes up in Ephesians 5:23, and is a center of controversy. In English, “head” often suggests leadership or authority. But in Greek, a head was usually just a body part, kind of like kidneys are to us. It’s clear that Paul means to use it as a figure of speech, but what does he mean? Some scholars say “authority,” others “source.” We need to determine what the word would have meant to first-century Ephesians. We can’t just assume, as we often do, that Paul meant “head” like an English speaker would.

Learn more at cbe.today/head.

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In a language of West Africa, a highly literal translation was made of Mark 10:38, in which Jesus asks James and John, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” When a speaker of this language was asked if this expression was ever used by his people, he replied, “Yes, it is. It is what a drunkard would say to challenge his fellows as to whether they could drink as much drink or as strong a drink, as he himself could.” So to the readers of this translation, Jesus was a drunkard challenging James and John to a drinking bout!⁴ In a case like this, a non-literal translation is the way to go.

3. It’s about culture as well as language

Every language comes with a culture. A translator has to keep in mind that different cultures categorize the world differently, and language reflects these differences.

A New Testament translator for the Tausug language (Philippines), while translating the parable of the vineyard in Matthew 21, got to where it says that the vineyard owner, “went into a far country.” He and a team of native speakers tried various words to convey the idea of a man going on a long journey.

Viaje, a word borrowed from Spanish, means to take a trip for a specific purpose—a purpose like smuggling or carrying passengers.

This didn’t seem to fit, since the parable didn’t mention a specific purpose for the owner’s trip.

Layn means to change one’s residence. The parable doesn’t say that the vineyard owner was moving, so they looked for another word.

The translator asked the team, “The owner of the vineyard didn’t give his destination, didn’t say how long he planned to stay, or when he was coming back. How would you say that?”

The team replied, “We would say, ‘he paddled.’”

The people live over the water in houses on stilts, and they earn their living from the sea. From birth, they spend time in their boats. “But,” the translator said, “this vineyard owner lived in the interior, not near the shore, and he didn’t go on a boat.”

“That doesn’t matter,” the team replied, “This is the word we’d use even if he went by truck or on foot.”

So in that New Testament, the owner of the vineyard “paddled” to a far country.

If that seems odd, consider that English does the same kind of thing. We just don’t usually notice it because the translation sounds natural to us.

In ancient Hebrew culture, the kidneys were considered the center of feelings and desires. The heart was viewed as the center of thought.⁶ In English, we feel with our hearts and think with our minds, and we don’t speak of our kidneys figuratively at all. So when we translate a passage like Psalm 7:9, we swap body parts: “. . . you who test the *minds* [Hebrew: hearts] and *hearts* [Hebrew: kidneys], O righteous God!” (ESV, emphasis mine).

These kinds of differences of expression are needed to allow God's word to speak to the reader's hearts (or kidneys, if you prefer).

4. It's worth doing

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart. —Nelson Mandela

This article barely scratches the surface of Bible translation. The challenges are many and important, but we can never give up on

getting it right so that God's Word speaks to our hearts. The Bible's been in English for hundreds of years, but we're still trying to make sure we've got it right. Whether or not we follow God faithfully depends on how we understand the Bible.

When faithfully translated, each challenge presents an opportunity to produce notes in a symphony. If the notes ring clear and true, the majesty of the music will be heard and felt the way the composer intended. God uses his translated Word to speak with a clear and powerful voice to those whom he loves—

female and male—in the native languages of tribes and nations, large and small, in every corner of the globe.



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¹ The perspectives expressed in this article are mine, and should not be seen as representative of Wycliffe Bible Translators. Sidebars are editorial content, and not my own.

² "What Language Did Jesus Speak," *Za Blog*, Zondervan Academic, September 7, 2016, <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/what-language-did-jesus-speak/>.

³ John Beekman and John and Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1984) 20–21. See also David Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013) 35. Brunn states that every literal version uses classic dynamic equivalence principles in many contexts. He includes numerous pages of data throughout his book to support the veracity of this statement.

⁴ Beekman and Callow, 22.

⁵ Jonathan Merritt and Gareth Robinson, "Southern Baptists Embrace Gender-Inclusive Language in the Bible," *The Atlantic*, June 11, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/southern-baptists-embrace-gender-inclusive-language-in-the-bible/529935/>.

⁶ Brunn, 45–47. Also see R.G. Bratcher and W.D. Reyerburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991) 72.

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