

What I Have  
Learned  
About Greek  
& Translation  
Since Joining the CBT



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When I joined the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) in the summer of 2010, it was an answer to prayer. The CBT is the translation committee that controls the wording of the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, as well as its headings and footnotes. For ten years I had been the New Testament Chair of the English Standard Version (ESV), but that project had ended three years previously. I shared with my wife one night how I was missing translation work, and the very next morning I received an invitation from Douglas Moo, the Chair of the CBT, to join the committee as a “friendly critic.”

The label “friendly critic” probably came for two reasons. One was that I had signed the protest against the CBT’s work on the Today’s New International Version (TNIV) translation, the variation to the NIV published in 2005, that proved to be controversial due to its handling of gender language. But when the criticism against the TNIV became personal, questioning the motives of the CBT members, I removed my name from the list of objectors. I do not believe it is helpful to question motives; no one can authentically determine what those motives are, and what truly matters are the facts.

The other reason for the label “friendly critic” is that the ESV follows a significantly different translation philosophy than the NIV; it is very much a formal equivalent, word-for-word approach, or what the ESV publisher calls “essentially literal.” Therefore, I assumed that Moo was expecting I would try and draw the NIV more toward the formal equivalent side of the translation debate.

The other piece of background information that is important in understanding this paper is that the bulk of my academic life has been spent in teaching first-year Greek. In first-year language classes, the student is learning the building blocks, or the basics of the language. Teachers of first-year Greek nearly always tend toward a conservative approach to translation: for example, we generally want students to use “of” with the genitive case whenever possible. We want the aorist tense translated as the simple past and reserve “have” or “has” for the perfect tense. We want students to focus on the most basic meaning of each vocabulary word (its “gloss”). My long experience with this made the task of translating the ESV, a formal equivalent translation, much simpler. Consider:

1. Translators of formal equivalent translations such as the ESV and NASB want the English to reflect the Greek and Hebrew structures; therefore they translate word-for-word as much as possible.
2. These translators prefer to use the same gloss, as much as possible, for the same Greek word (called “concordance”).
3. They want ambiguous Greek constructions to remain ambiguous, leaving it up to the reader to determine whether the “love of God” is my love for God or God’s love for me.

I say all this because it sets the stage for what I have learned from being on the CBT. The NIV has tested almost every assumption I had made regarding what an “accurate and readable” translation should be.

## **Literally, There is No Such Thing as Literal**

I have learned that the word “literal” should be banned from all discussion of translation. Most of the time its use assumes the conclusion. Someone will say they want a “literal” Bible, by which they mean word-for-word. So by their very definition of the term “literal,” the conclusion of the debate is assumed. The problem is that this simply is not the primary meaning of the word “literal.”

The basic meaning of “literal” has to do with *meaning*, not *form*. It denotes the actual, factual meaning of something, “free from exaggeration or embellishment” (*Merriam-Webster*). The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “literal” as,<sup>1</sup>

1. Being in accordance with, conforming to, or upholding the exact or primary meaning of a word or words.
2. Word for word; verbatim.
3. Avoiding exaggeration, metaphor, or embellishment.

Hence, a “literal” translation is one that is primarily faithful to the meaning of the original author.

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1 These definitions are followed by all the dictionaries I could confirm, and most in the same order. The *Collins English Dictionary* has, as primary, “The literal sense of a word or phrase is its most basic sense.” The *Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English* has, “taking words in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or allegory.” *Merriam-Webster* lists, “reproduced word for word” as the fourth meaning.

To be sure, “literal” does have a secondary meaning, never listed first in the dictionaries, that would support using the term “literal” of a word-for-word translation, but it is an oddity of “literal” that it can convey such divergent meanings. The *American Heritage Dictionary* has the example, “The 300,000 Unionists ... will be literally thrown to the wolves.” Of course, the speaker “literally” does not want the Unionists to be torn apart by animals. Another dictionary speaks of “fifteen years of literal hell,” but that does not mean “hell”—at least, not “literally.”

I suspect that the reason for definitions like “reproduced word for word” (#3 in *Merriam-Webster*) is the result of the word’s misuse in discussion on translations (since dictionaries are both descriptive and prescriptive). I also suspect that what the dictionaries’ authors mean by “word for word” has more to do with lack of embellishment.

If we were to follow the second definition of “literal” above, then none of us would read Bibles; instead, we would be reading interlinears. We would turn to John 3:16 and read, “in this way for he loved the God the world so that the son the only he gave in order that each the believing into him not he perish but he has life eternal.” These are the English words that represent the Greek words. But no one thinks this is translation, so why would someone ask for a “literal” translation of the Bible? Any publisher that advertises that their Bible is a “literal” translation should only be selling interlinears.

My friend Mark Strauss, also on the CBT, makes the point that even a word does not have a “literal” meaning but rather what we call a “semantic range.” I like to refer to words as having a bundle of sticks, with each stick representing

a different (but perhaps related) meaning (but perhaps not related). Certainly, one of the sticks may be larger than the rest, representing the core idea of the word or what we teach in first-year Greek as the “gloss,” but it is only one among many. So if you were producing a “literal” Bible, how would you find the literal meaning of a word? A first-year Greek gloss, perhaps, but not the meaning of the word.

Mark uses the example of the word “key.” What does “key” “literally” mean? The answer is that it has no “literal” meaning. It has no core meaning. There is no big stick in its bundle. “Did you lose your key?” “What is the key to the puzzle?” “What is the key point?” “What key is that song in?” “Press the A key.” “He shoots best from the key.” “I first ate key lime pie in Key West in the Florida Keys.”

So what is the “literal” meaning of *sarx*? The NIV (1984 version) has been heavily criticized for translating *sarx* as context requires, but even the ESV uses 24 different English words to translate the one Greek word. *Sarx* has no “literal” meaning. Its main non-figurative use may be “flesh”; in fact, the biggest stick in its bundle may be “flesh.” But why would we think that “flesh” is its literal meaning, or even its original meaning?<sup>2</sup>

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2 My linguistics professor in seminary used to complain that dictionaries make the tacit assumption that the core (or at least the original) meaning of a word is its concrete meaning, and only over time has it developed figurative meanings. Why? Professor LaSor would often talk about the modern misunderstandings of ancient languages, saying that the “cave man” never said “Ugh.” Every ancient language we have found is extremely complex, one of the most complex being that of the aborigine people of Australia. It is only over time that languages simplify. To this point, consider the fact that one of God’s greatest creative acts in all reality—only after the miracles of creation *ex nihilo* and the Incarnation and resurrection of Jesus—was Babel. In one night, God created all the languages of the earth in all their complexities and intricacies. (There is no other way to account for human languages and is, I believe, one of the strongest arguments for the existence of God.) Part of this creative act was to endow words with a range of meaning from the beginning of the language.

This is why it is impossible to bring all the nuances of the Greek and Hebrew into English. Words are much too rich in meaning to be encapsulated into a single gloss. The more functional the translation, the easier it is to bring more of the meaning over. Jesus is our *hilasmos*, our “propitiation” (NASB), “expiation” (RSV), but the NIV uses “atoning sacrifice” and the NLT says “sacrifice that atones for our sins” (1 John 2:2). For a formal equivalent translation especially, nuances will by necessity be lost.

A significant challenge of a “literal translation” is translating idioms. In order to say that God is patient, Hebrew says that he has a “long nose,” brought into the KJV with the phrase “long suffering.” But the Hebrew author never meant to convey the idea that God has a protruding proboscis. It is an idiom, which means that the meanings of the individual words do not add up to the meaning of the phrase. In other words, it would be misleading to translate just the words; we have to translate the meaning conveyed by the words.

The same argument can be made with non-idioms, such as a genitive phrase. Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus “upholds all things by the word of his power.” This is basically word-for-word what the Greek says (*ferōn te ta panta tō rhēmati tēs dunameōs*).<sup>3</sup> The problem, of course, is that the translation doesn’t mean anything. I could understand “the power of his word,” but not the reverse. *Dunameōs* is clearly an Hebraic

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3 Actually, word-for-word would be, “upholding and the all things by the word of power his.” And actually, that is still not exactly word-for-word. I interpreted the adjectival phrase “the all” (*ta panta*) to be a substantival construction (“all things”). I had to change a dative phrase (*tō rhēmati*) into a prepositional phrase (“by the word”). I also changed a genitive phrase (*tēs dunameōs*) into a prepositional phrase (“of power”), and a genitive (*autou*) into a possessive pronoun. Even the simplest of Greek constructions cannot, technically, be translated word-for-word.

genitive and hence the NLT translates, “he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command.” A “literal” translation would produce a meaningless phrase if all it did was translate words.

One of the truths that I have learned since coming on the CBT is that the word “literal” should never be used in a discussion of translation because it is so readily misunderstood. But if used, it should be used accurately. A “literal” translation has very little to do with form. A “literal” translation

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## **We Translate Meaning, not Words**

**W**ithout being too simplistic, I have learned that translation is not translating words; it is translating meaning. To put it another way, translation is the process by which we reproduce the meaning of the text; translation does not replicate the form of the text.

To explain this, I need to talk about what I have learned about translation theory in general. Most people say there are two basic approaches to translation:

1. *Formal equivalence* says that the purpose of translation is to adhere as closely as possible to the grammatical structures of the original language, altering the translation only when necessary to convey meaning. “Word-for-word” describes this approach.

2. The *functional* or *dynamic* view of translation uses the words (along with other things like grammar and context) to discover the original meaning—the “authorial intent”— and then conveys the same meaning in the target language.

Translations do not fit neatly into one of these approaches or the other; they fit along a continuum with a significant overlap. For example, the same translation can be formal in one verse and functional in the next. However, most people think in terms of two basic approaches. I have come to see that this is not accurate; there are at least five categories of translation theory.

### 1. Literal

Although I have already expressed my dislike of this term, I will use it here to make a point. If someone wants a “literal” translation, using the term “literal” in its secondary sense, there is only one example of a “literal translation”: the interlinear.

An interlinear will list the Greek words in Greek word order, and under each Greek word will appear a basic gloss for its meaning. Here is Romans 3:22.

δικαιοσύνη	δὲ	θεοῦ	διὰ	πίστεως	Ἰησοῦ	Χριστοῦ
righteousness	but	of God	through	faith	of Jesus	of Christ

εἰς	πάντας	τοὺς	πιστεύοντας.	οὐ	γάρ	ἐστὶν	διαστολή,
into	all	the	believing	not	for	it is	distinction

Is it understandable? Barely. Is it translation? No. As much as I would like the word “literal” to go away, I doubt it will. Will people start to use the word accurately? I hope so. But please, do not believe the marketing hype: there is no such thing as a “literal” translation. The very idea is linguistic nonsense.

## 2. Formal Equivalence

These translations try to reflect the formal structures of the original text, making the translation “transparent” to the original. This means translating indicative verbs as indicative, participles as participles, and trying to use the same English word for the same Greek word if possible (“concordance”). When it makes no sense to translate word-for-word, the translators ask what the verse means, and then how they can convey the same meaning while adhering as closely as possible to the formal Greek structures. The ESV, NASB, and KJV<sup>4</sup> fall into this camp.<sup>5</sup>

The problem is that this admission—that meaning is primary to form when the words have no meaning in and of themselves—is itself a refutation of the basic tenet of formal equivalence. If the meaning of the sentence is the ultimate criterion, then meaning becomes the ultimate goal of translation. It may give some people comfort to think that their translation reflects the underlying Greek and Hebrew structures, but if they don’t know Greek and Hebrew then they can’t know when the translations in fact do reflect that structure. In every single verse, there will

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4 An argument can be made for the KJV being in the next category, the functional equivalent. While it definitely prefers to go word-for-word, at times it becomes quite dynamic. Paul asks, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” and then responds, “God forbid.” The word “God” and the word “forbid” do not occur in the Greek, but it is an excellent dynamic translation of the meaning of the phrase, *mē genoito*. Or the famous Psalm 23:4 — “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” The Hebrew word behind “shadow of death” is “darkness,” but the KJV dynamically interprets “darkness” to mean “death.”

5 Sometimes I wonder if people forget that we are not ultimately talking about translation in general but about the translation of God’s holy Word. Sometimes I wonder if people are more committed to a translation theory than they are to actually conveying the salvific message that in Christ the world is being reconciled to God. Sometimes I wonder if people immersed in this debate would rather argue for their theory than to present the gospel message in a way that their neighbor can understand.

be differences between the Greek and the English. All translations are interpretive.

By staying as close as possible to the Hebrew and Greek words, formal equivalent translations carefully honor the dividing line between translation and

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All translations are interpretive.

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commentary. This is commendable, as is the attempt to provide concordance to the English reader.

But concordance can be tricky. One of the most difficult passages to translate is 1 Timothy 2:1–7 because we no longer have the word to translate *anthrōpos*, which Paul is using to tie the passage together.<sup>6</sup> Paul’s basic argument is that the Ephesians should pray for all “men,” because God wishes all “men” to be saved, and there is only one mediator between God and “men,” the man Christ Jesus. Only the NASB keeps the concordance, but thereby suggests to some modern readers that the Ephesians should pray for all males. Even the ESV, which has a strong commitment to concordance, translates *pantōn anthrōpōn* as “all people,” with a footnote on verse 5. But God wants all people to be saved, and the point is not that Christ Jesus is a male but that he is part of humanity.

Another issue with concordance is that it can place too much weight on one gloss of a word and can thereby mislead. The NASB translates *polis* every time as “city.” This is helpful for the informed English reader watching for concordance, but the “city” of Nazareth was no more than a wide spot in the road inhabited by 600 people and hence the practice also

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<sup>6</sup> See discussion of gender language below.

misinforms.<sup>7</sup> Teachers know that *sarx* occurs 147 times in the Greek Testament and is translated 24 different ways in the ESV (excluding plurals). *Logos* occurs 334 times and is translated 36 different ways by the New American Standard Bible (NASB). These examples demonstrate that concordance may be an ideal for which to strive, but it is frequently impossible to achieve.

Some claim that formal equivalent translations have a higher view of inspiration, recognizing each word as a word from God and hence worthy of translation. When modern translators do not know for sure what a word or phrase means,

I agree that there is value in simply translating the words and leaving interpretation up to the reader. We do not know what “Selah” means in the Psalms, but most translations still include it. How-

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ever, this insistence can show a defective view of language and how it conveys meaning. Verbal plenary inspiration means that the meaning conveyed by the words is from God; however, if inspiration applied only to the words, then none of us would or should be reading English Bibles since those inspired words are in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Consider the story of the prodigal son. When the father saw his prodigal son returning, he ran and “fell on his neck” (KJV, Luke 15:20). While that is a word-for-word translation, it certainly is not what

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<sup>7</sup> The ESV translates πόλις 121 times as city/cities and 40 times as town(s). “Neapolis” occurs twice.

the text means. Even the NASB, the most formal equivalent translation in English, says that the father “embraced” him, with the footnote, “*Lit fell on his neck.*” If that is what it literally means, then why not translate it as such? While the Greek is *epi ton traxēlon autou*, the individual words do not convey the meaning, but the phrase does. The NET’s footnote is much better: “*Grk ‘he fell on his neck.’*” The idiom means the father “embraced” (ESV, NLT) or hugged his son (NET). The NIV is clever in preserving the idiom in an understandable way; “threw his arms around his neck” (also CSB).

A translation should make sense, written in the vernacular of the receptor language.<sup>8</sup> Meaning can be conveyed by a word, but usually it is conveyed by a group of words. Insisting that formal equivalent translations have a higher view of inspiration reflects a defective view of how language conveys meaning.

### 3. Functional (or Dynamic) Equivalence

These translations argue that the purpose of translation is to convey the meaning of the original text into the target language. It may mean that a participle is translated as an indicative verb, or that a few Greek words are passed over (such as conjunctions) or translated as punctuation marks in order to produce proper English style. This introduces an additional amount of interpretation, which can be problematic. It also produces a more understandable translation,

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<sup>8</sup> Translating idioms is almost impossible for any type of translation, but especially for a formal equivalent. We would never say “cover your feet” for using the toilet, or “having in the womb” for being pregnant—except in an interlinear. I was teaching in China several years back and talked about “straddling the fence.” I stopped and asked my translator how she handled that idiom. Turns out there is a similar (but not exact) idiom in Mandarin about having each foot on a different boat. But most idioms do not have even approximate equivalents and hence cannot be translated word-for-word.

which is the purpose of translation. However, these versions can still be somewhat idiomatic, not speaking totally natural English but adhering somewhat to the underlying Greek and Hebrew structures. The NIV and CSB<sup>9</sup> fit into this camp.<sup>10</sup>

Many who adhere to the functional view of translation see little meaning in the grammatical structures of the original text. I take issue with this, especially in reference to dependent and independent constructions. Not always, but certainly many times, the flow of the author's thought is most clearly seen in the main sentence, and the dependent constructions are secondary, modifying thoughts. The best example is the Great Commission. Despite the many sermons you and I have heard from missionaries, the Great Commission is not, "Go!" There actually is only one imperative: "Make disciples of all nations." In order to do this, Jesus supplies three modifying thoughts (dependent participial phrases) to tell us that this involves going (necessary to reach all people groups), baptizing (i.e., evangelism), and "teaching" (i.e., discipleship). Some meaning is being conveyed by structure, and that is significant.

#### **4. Natural Language**

This is an extension of functional equivalence, but it sees no value in any of the formal structures and tries to repeat the same message in the full idiom of the target language. Eugene Nida says that the purpose of a translation is to transport "the message of the original text ... into the receptor language [such] that the response of the receptor is essentially like

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<sup>9</sup> The CSB uses their own terminology of "optimal equivalence."

<sup>10</sup> Also the CEB, NET, REB, NAB. Some people call this a "mediating" category of translation.

that of the original receptors.”<sup>11</sup> The best example of a natural language translation is the NLT.<sup>12</sup> There is much I enjoy in the NLT. I often read it to see what a highly qualified group of scholars believes the biblical text to mean, and it rarely disappoints.

I do have two issues with natural language translations. If I read a modern translation of Caesar’s Gallic Wars, and it reads so naturally that I could not tell it was speaking of a person who lived two millennia ago in a totally different culture than I do, I would naturally be suspicious of the translation. There is something significant about entering into the historical context in order to understand what was written. After all, Christianity is rooted in history. Unlike most other religions, if these things did not happen—the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus—then we believe in vain. They did happen, but they happened in a different time in a different culture and are told to us in a different language. I believe it is helpful to feel the cultural differences.<sup>13</sup>

The second problem is that this camp will often introduce ideas simply not included in the Greek to

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11 Nida, Eugene A., and Charles R. Taber. (1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation, With Special Reference to Bible Translating*, p. 202. Leiden: Brill.

12 Also the NCV, GW, GNT, CEV, JB, NJB. I am using terms a little differently here from how other people use them. Mark Strauss, for example, equates “functional” and “natural,” and what I call “functional” he calls “mediating.”

13 All translations have to deal with the related issue of weights and measures, and use of either the American or the metric system. Was the wicked servant forgiven his debt of a *muriōn talantōn*, a myriad of talents, “ten thousand talents” (NASB, with the footnote, “A talent was worth more than fifteen years’ wages of a laborer”), or “ten thousand bags of gold” (NIV, with the footnote, “Greek ten thousand talents; a talent was worth about 20 years of a day laborer’s wages”). The Greek lexicon BDAG defines μύριοι as “ten thousand,” but continues by saying “in our lit. used hyperbolically, as in Engl. informal usage ‘zillion’, of an extremely large or incalculable number.” Such are the challenges of replicating the original context while remaining understandable.

achieve natural English style and readability. As a result, readers don't know if they are reading the Bible or the translators' comments. This is the basic reason why I separate functional equivalent translations like the NIV and CSB, which are quite restrained in what they add, and natural language translations like the NLT, which are comfortable adding a significant amount of extra information.

For example, Greek often omits the direct object of the verb, or uses a pronoun where English needs the antecedent. Greek likes long sentences, and when they are shortened for English style the subject from the first part of the Greek sentence needs to be repeated with the second English sentence. This is all acceptable translation.

However, Luke tells us that the sailors, fearing they would run aground on the Syrtis, "lowered the sea anchor" (Acts 27:17). The NLT continues, "They were afraid of being driven across to the sandbars of Syrtis off the African coast." Assuming the Greek readers would understand "the Syrtis" as "the sandbars off the African coast," the NLT does achieve its goal of conveying the full meaning of the original, but to my mind this goes beyond the role of a translation. Certainly not all ancient people knew there was a sandbar in that area, and Luke did not feel it was important to add this fact, assuming "run aground" was sufficient to convey the meaning.

## **5. Paraphrase**

I need to mention the term "paraphrase." It is sometimes used, often erroneously so, in discussions of translations, sometimes equating it with loose translations that change or distort the historical meaning

of the text. As is the case with the term “literal,” we need to use words that actually mean what we say they mean. Linguists use “paraphrase” for a rewording for the purpose of simplification *in the same language*, not in a different language. So the *Living Bible* is a true paraphrase since it is a simplification of the (English) ASV, but viewing a translation from the Hebrew and Greek as a paraphrase is an incorrect use of the term.

Better terms than “paraphrase” for this category of translations might be “contemporary relevance versions” or “transculturations,” since these versions alter the cultural perspective of the text in order to connect to the modern reader. However, I do not believe these should be called “Bibles” because at any point it is hard to tell what is the Bible and what is the author’s attempt to make the message of the Bible relevant to his (or her) own culture. In this category are J.B. Phillip’s wonderful *The New Testament in Modern English* (my mom became a Christian reading this book), Eugene Petersen’s *The Message*, and Kenneth Taylor’s original *Living Bible*.

These publications sacrifice historical precision for contemporary relevance. So Peterson will say that the Pharisees are “manicured grave plots” instead of “white-washed tombs” (Matthew 23:27). The Pharisees live lives as “perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next,” instead of saying the Pharisees make “their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long” (Matthew 23:5, NIV). Peterson is making the text relevant for the twenty-first century at the expense of historical accuracy.

While there are five distinct theories of translation, we must remember that there is much overlap. I would guess there is about an eighty percent overlap between the ESV and NIV. They are not two distinct, unrelated points on a graph; rather, they are overlapping circles.

Also, at times the ESV is quite formal, but at times quite functional. The same can be said of all translations; even the NLT

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periodically displays the underlying language structures, and at times the NASB is quite dynamic.

I have learned there are five clearly defined schools of translation and all but the interlinear are committed, in varying degrees, to convey meaning and not just the words. I have also learned that we should not be simplistic at categorizing a translation as if it always follows just one translation philosophy.

## **English and Greek Styles are Fundamentally Different**

The fact that English and Greek are different languages is obvious, but I have learned that the differences go far beyond basic grammar and vocabulary. When I first joined the committee, one of my adjustments was to the amount of time we spend on writing understandable English.

For example, a common Greek construction is to have an aorist adverbial participle followed by an indicative verb. This is one way in which the Greeks indicate sequence. The first-

year Greek student, in order to show that they understand it is an aorist, would most likely have to distinguish the participle from the indicative as well as include “after” to show that it is adverbial. Matthew 2:3 would read, “King Herod, after hearing, was troubled.” This translation distinguishes the two verbal forms but at the expense of English style.

In English, we handle sequence differently. If we hear A, and B, and C, we tend to hear them in sequence. A happened, then B, then C. Greek doesn't, so it needs an indicator that one action happened first and then the second. This is a common function of the aorist participle. So how do we translate it with proper English style? We say, “King Herod heard and was troubled.” We turn the participle (“hearing”) into an indicative (“heard”) because that is what English style requires to indicate sequence.

One of the arguments I have used in the past is that by translating a participle as a participle and an indicative as an indicative, we are preserving the Greek structure and are distinguishing the main point (made in the indicative) from the secondary point (made with the participle). I still believe there is some value to this in general. But using a past-tense participle (“after hearing”) in this context is poor English style, and the sequencing of the two indicative verbs conveys the same meaning to the English reader.

Another argument I have heard in favor of preserving Greek style at the expense of English is because it reflects the underlying Hebrew and Greek structures. But why is this important? If someone knows Hebrew and Greek well enough to benefit from seeing its structure, then they should read Hebrew and Greek. If someone doesn't know enough to read

Hebrew and Greek, what legitimate reason can there be for favoring an awkward, wooden translation?

Another example of difference in style is how Greek and English handle a series of items. Greek tends to use conjunctions more than we do, so it says *A and B and C and D*. This is poor English style; we say *A, B, C, and D*. The first may reflect Greek structure but is poor English. The latter reflects how we speak and write.

This illustrates why it is impossible to translate in a way that is transparent to Greek structures and at the same time remain sufficiently flexible so as to retain accurate and acceptable English style. You can't have it both ways (unless you like *biblish*<sup>14</sup>), and each translation must choose one course or another.

I have learned that attention to style is important. The Greek of the New Testament is, for the most part, proper Greek (albeit often basic); some of it is quite elegant. Our translations should do justice to this aspect of God's Word, but that requires attention to English style.

## **Meaning is Conveyed Primarily by Phrases, Not by Individual Words**

Languages say the same thing, but in different ways. The goal of translation is to accurately convey the meaning of the original text into the receptor language. All would agree so far.

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<sup>14</sup> "Biblish" is a form of English based on older Bibles and is understood only by people with that background. As much as I love the idea of "abiding in Christ," it is doubtful that this biblish phrase would convey meaning to the average modern reader, and hence the NIV's "remain in me" (also CSB, NET; John 15:4). The NASB and surprisingly the NRSV keep "abide."

But what does “accurate” mean? How do you express meaning, and how do you translate that meaning accurately? In the past, I sided with the argument that “accurate” meant as word-for-word as possible and leave interpretation up to the English reader. Since joining the CBT, I have realized that we rarely convey meaning with only one word. Meaning is usually conveyed through a group of words, bound together by grammar, understood within a specific context. Accuracy has to do with meaning, not with form.

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Accuracy has to do with meaning, not with form.

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When I was learning German, I went to the Goethe Institute in Schwäbisch Hall, Germany. There is nothing like learning a language in an immersive experience. Some of my friends

knew a lot more German than I did, but they were good at forcing me to speak in German rather than rescue me with English. One day it was cold outside, so I thought I would say that I was cold. “I” is “Ich.” “Am” is “bin.” “Cold” is “kalt.” So I proudly announced, “Ich bin kalt.” If you know German, you can imagine what happened. My friends hit the ground, rolling and laughing hysterically.

I reviewed my words. Yes, “Ich bin kalt” are the right words. I had conveyed meaning accurately I thought; my friends’ laughter disagreed. When they managed to regain their composure, they told me that if I wanted to say I was cold, I should have said, “To me it is cold:” “Mir ist kalt.” I asked what I had “said,” and they replied that I said I was sexually frigid. Later that spring, I still had not learned my lesson and announced, “Ich bin warm” (instead of “mir ist heiß” or “es ist heiß”). I will let you figure out what “Ich bin warm” means.

The CBT (and my German friends) taught me that we communicate in groups of words, bound together by grammar, and understood within a specific context. It is naive to think that a word-for-word substitution from one language to another is inherently more accurate. If you disagree, I suggest you do not travel to Germany in the late fall.

A related topic is ambiguity. In a desire to be as non-interpretive as possible—indeed, in a desire to interject as little of yourself into the translation as possible (good aspirations to be sure)—some argue that translations should be as ambiguous as possible and leave the interpretation up to the reader. I can see the point, as long as at the same time the translation does not claim to be accurate. Ambiguity and accuracy rarely go hand in hand. They are, in fact, opposites, assuming you understand “accuracy” as “accuracy of meaning.”

Take Paul’s question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Romans 8:35). Is that accurate? “Love of Christ” is, to be sure, close to a word-for-word translation of *tēs agapēs tou Xristou* and hence non-interpretive (even though “love” is an inadequate translation of *agapē*, and *Xristos* requires interpretation since it originally meant “to be wiped with oil”). But what does it mean? Does it mean that nothing can separate me from my love for Christ? That simply is not true; I am thankful that the Lord remembers my frame, that it is dust, and that my heart is prone to wander. Certainly, it means that no one can separate us from Christ’s love for us, that his love is the anchor in the storms of my life. And so the NLT accurately translates, “Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love?” Does this require interpretation? Of course—all translation involves interpretation to some

degree. (Anyone who claims otherwise does not understand even the rudimentary elements of translation.)

My point is this: Can it honestly be said that the ambiguous translation is accurate? No. It is vague and open to misinterpretation. It is not accurate because it does not convey the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek. Accuracy is a matter of meaning, not form, and meaning is primarily conveyed by phrases, not by individual words.

## **There are Challenges in Writing for a Broadly English Audience**

I am a white, middle-aged male, raised in Minnesota, Kentucky, and California. I was born into an educated family with minimal influence from the secular world; the first movie I ever saw was the cartoon *Bambi* when I was 16 years old. Many family dinner conversations were about the meanings of words: dad liked to read through the dictionary and challenge us with his latest word. (My favorite was “arglebargle.”) I enjoyed school, and stayed within the walls of the academy from my years in a private high school, through university, seminary, and graduate school. And then I taught at university and seminary. It is within this cultural context that I understand words and grammar and meaning. But not everyone is like me.

One of the things I enjoy on the CBT is translating with fourteen other people—men and women from different continents and in some cases significantly different backgrounds. The fact is that we often hear words differently. Doug Moo tells the story of a discussion over the translation of *erēmos*

as “wilderness” or “desert,” and Ken Barker’s objection that “wilderness” is a heavily wooded area. Ken was raised in the hills of eastern Kentucky and hears the word decidedly differently than I do; I was raised in western Kentucky.

I still smile when I think back to my first days in Scotland as I was headed to begin my Ph.D. studies in Aberdeen. I asked the conductor on the train where the bathroom was, and he responded (without smiling), “Why? Do you want to take a bath?” Obviously, we were having a failure to communicate. It is challenging to translate for a worldwide audience.

I am reminded of how the word “deacon” means decidedly different things depending on whether you are from the northern or the southern part of the United States. In the north, a deacon is closer to being a trustee and takes care of the building and grounds. In the south, however, historically preachers went from church to church, and it was the deacons who ran the church when the preacher was not present. So, is Phoebe a “servant” or a “deacon” (*diakonos*) in the church in Cenchreae (Romans 16:1)? “Deacon” means decidedly different things depending on one’s cultural or geographic background.

There is also the issue of gender language. For some people, “man” and “he” can still be understood generically, referring to men and women alike. But for many others, they only mean “male.” We may not like this; we may think it should be different, going back in time. But it is a fact that many people do not hear “man” and “he” generically, and saying “man” and “he” will make it difficult for them to hear clearly the message of the Bible. Remember, grammar is descriptive as well as prescriptive; to insist that language not change is naïve.

I will never forget walking into my daughter's bedroom when she was 8 years old. Kiersten had copied a verse out of the Bible, pinned it to her bulletin board, had crossed out "he" and wrote "she." After I complimented her on her desire to read and memorize the Bible, I asked why the alteration. I will never forget her innocent response: "The Bible is for me too and not just Tyler, isn't it?" (Tyler is her big brother.)

We are also in the middle of a sea change in language where "they" is becoming the third person pronoun that can refer to women or men. Many people decry this, but this is what is happening to English. "They" was not marked for gender in Elizabethan English (check out Shakespeare), and the "indefinite they" is coming back in vogue.<sup>15</sup>

Since the issue of gender language is front and center these days, let's be sure we are using the words properly. Like the five translation camps above, there is frequent misunderstanding about the meaning of these three gender terms. I have learned that they are rarely used accurately, especially in the blogosphere.

## 1. Gender Neutral

This kind of translation would seek to neutralize or eliminate gender-specific references as much as possible. "Parent" would be used instead of "father," "ancestor" for "forefather," "child" for "son," and "person" for "man" without regard for the actual referent. When my daughter writes a bio about herself for a Ph.D symposium, she has to refer to herself as "they." My daughter is a female person,

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<sup>15</sup> See [bit.ly/gender-language](http://bit.ly/gender-language)

but she cannot refer to herself as “she.” This is being gender neutral. I am not aware of any translation that intentionally does this.

## **2. Gender Inclusive**

This is the more common term used with reference to gender language in translation, yet it can be vague and misleading. A “gender inclusive” version would make everything inclusive, whether the original makes gender specific statements or not. So biblical statements about men would consistently be translated as if they were referring to both men and women. I am also not aware of any translation that intentionally does this.

## **3. Gender Accurate**

These are translations that intentionally clarify gender. They refer to “men” using male language, “women” using female language, and use inclusive terms when referring to both men and women. Their goal is to be accurate and specific with reference to gender. But let me make three points.

- a. Where the translations differ is on the pronouns used to refer back to an indefinite noun or pronoun (e.g., “person,” “someone,” “anyone”). The ESV and CSB will refer back to an antecedent such as “anyone” with the anaphoric “he.” The NIV often uses singular “they.” The NRSV has other ways (much like the now-defunct TNIV) such as using plurals or second person.

Psalm 1 begins, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked .... *That person* is like a tree planted by streams of water” (NIV). The CSB begins verse 3, “*He* is like” (also ESV, NET, KJV). The NLT says “*They*” (also NRSV).

- b. Another decision all translators have to make is how to handle references to a male where that male stands as a representative for men and women. Proverbs 3:11–12 is the classic passage. “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the *son* he delights in” (NIV, emphasis added). This preserves a classic form of wisdom literature, and the expectation is that the reader will understand that what is true of the son is also true of the daughter. Compare this to the NLT: “My child, don’t reject the LORD’s discipline, and don’t be upset when he corrects you. For the LORD corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a *child* in whom he delights.”
- c. The third situation affected by gender issues is the translation of *adelphos*. With whom do we have to reconcile—only our male Christian friends or all our Christian friends? It depends (at one level) in whether you hear “brother” as “male” or as “fellow believer” in Matthew 18:16. The NIV reads, “If your *brother or sister* sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.” The CSB has, “If your *brother* sins against you, go and rebuke him in private.”

- d. The related word is *anthrōpos*. Should we translate it as “men,” or with words that mean “men and women”? 1 Timothy 2, which I discussed above, is a good illustration.

The NIV is committed to using broadly understood English, and by “broad” I mean world-wide. After all, it is the New *International* Version. This commitment controls much of the language the CBT chooses, including our preferred gender-accurate terms. The members of the translation team all hear things slightly differently, and it is in the discussion that we come to understand each other and settle on a translation (but not always a spelling) that can be understood across the continents. For those times the Brits can’t agree with the Americans, they laugh and say they will “fix” it in the Anglicized version of the NIV.

English is in a constant state of flux, as are most languages. This includes not only gender language but also things like the demise of the subjunctive and the predicate nominative, changes I decry. I like the difference between “may” and “can,” and I answer the phone “It is I,” but those differences are going away, like it or not. This is one of the reasons why the CBT was originally formed with the mandate to meet every year and keep the NIV up-to-date with current English and biblical scholarship. We are the only translation team to do so; and while it means a favorite verse may get changed, it also means that favorite verse will be kept current with the English spoken around the world.

Translating for a large swath of people, and not just a certain physical locale, has been a learning experience.

## **Opposition to a Translation Can be Fierce and Ignorant**

One of the things I have learned since joining the CBT is how vicious some people can be, and the NIV, the modern English version of the Bible with the greatest use, is often the focus of attack. An example is the common assertion that the NIV leaves out seventeen verses in the Bible “due to the translators’ theological agenda.” Never once have I heard someone say that any other modern translation lacks the same verses, or that the KJV has added seventeen verses.

Let’s set the record straight on this. Erasmus’ Greek text was based on basically three manuscripts from the 1100s, except for the last six verses in Revelation, which he translated from the Latin Vulgate. Beza’s Greek text is a corrected version of the fourth edition of Erasmus’ work in which he claimed to have the “Received Text.” This in turn became the Greek text behind the Geneva Bible (1560), the first Bible we know of to introduce versification, and eventually the King James translation (1611).

Since that time, scholars have discovered manuscripts much older than the 1100s that have fewer alterations and additions than the manuscripts used by Erasmus, and hence these Greek manuscripts are used not just by the NIV, but by all modern translations (except the NKJV). These older, superior Greek manuscripts often do not have these seventeen verses.

The academic field of Textual Criticism is tasked with looking at the nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament

and trying to discover what was originally written. What is amazing is how well the work of textual critics has been received, and I know of no other biblical discipline where the results of scholars' work is so widely accepted. I know of only one scholar among thousands who would disagree with this assessment and who prefers the family of manuscripts supporting Erasmus' twelfth-century manuscripts.

So does the NIV leave out verses?

Of course not. Every member of the CBT has an extremely high view of Scripture and would never allow any theological conviction to remove verses. The same is true of the NASB, ESV, CSB, and NLT—to name but a few.

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The historical fact of the matter is that these seventeen verses were added centuries after the New Testament books were written. They are all mentioned in the footnotes of the NIV and in most of the other translations mentioned above. But because of the NIV's popularity, it is easy to attack the NIV.

Another example of ignorance is the reaction against the translation of Psalm 23:4 in the NIV. A well-known Christian magazine called the CBT "cowards" because we translated Psalm 23:4 as, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil" (see also CSB, NET, NLT, NRSV). The fact of the matter is that the Hebrew word behind "darkest" means "darkest," and it was the interpretive KJV that changed it to "death."

Ignorance and arrogance are common bedfellows.

## When People Run out of Arguments, They Attack the Translators

I have mentioned the issue of questioning motives previously, but let me emphasize the point here in connection with my previous point. No one knows the motives of the CBT. No one knows our hearts. But that does not stop some people from lashing out and making outrageous accusations.

I have heard from critics that the CBT is pushing its theological agenda. Let me be clear on this point. After sixteen years on two translation teams, I have never once seen a specific theological agenda influence translation other than an evangelical agenda: Mary was a virgin (Matthew 1:23) and Jesus is God (Romans 9:5). I have seen federalists translate *ef hō* in Romans 5:12 as “because” and not “in whom.” I have seen complementarians translate *diakonon* as “deacon” and not “servant” in Romans 16:1.

I have heard from critics that Douglas Moo (the Chair of the CBT) has an egalitarian agenda, even though he is a published complementarian.

I have heard critics claim that HarperCollins controls the NIV. A little dose of reality goes a long way here. HarperCollins Christian Publishing does own Zondervan, which prints the NIV, but they do not own Biblica (formerly, the International Bible Society), which does own the NIV. However, only the CBT controls the wording of the NIV, not Biblica. From day one, the CBT was established to have total control over the text of the NIV without any outside influence or pressure. I have never experienced any pressure from Biblica or

Zondervan or HarperCollins when it comes to the text of the NIV, and that is as it should be.

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In every situation so far where my personal motives have been attacked in print (usually in blogs), the accuser has been wrong. Motives are tricky things. I don't think we even know our own motives some of the time. But questioning the motives of another, in ignorance, is wrong.

I have never experienced any pressure from Biblica or Zondervan or HarperCollins when it comes to the text of the NIV, and that is as it should be.

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I have learned that it is easy to attack a person's motives when you do not know the person (and hence their motives) and when you are not able to argue your point persuasively. *Ad hominem* arguments are the last bastion of ignorance.

## Conclusion

Finally, one of the things I have learned since joining the CBT is the incredible influence the NIV has around the world. The royalties paid by HarperCollins Christian Publishing to Biblica help fund Biblica's massive efforts to supply Bibles around the world.

When Biblica starts a new translation, they look for translators who can work from the Hebrew and Greek. If they are able to find these translators, the NIV serves as a guide as to how to translate the Hebrew and Greek. If Biblica is not able to find scholars with the necessary language skills, translations are made directly from the NIV into the receptor languages.

As a result, I can say with confidence that the NIV has done more to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ than any translation since the King James. It is a humbling experience to be a “friendly critic” on the CBT and I am thankful for the opportunity to help spread the Word of God to the ends of the earth with a translation that is both accurate and understandable.

