Why so many translations? Making sense of all the choices

By Nathaniel J. Erickson, PhD

December 1, 2022

Week 2: The Making of a (Good) Translation

Last week we summarized how Bible translations come into existence—the journey from "text to translation," as Paul Wegner memorably puts it in his book.[1] This journey is long and complicated, with many more factors than what we skimmed through. The simple fact that this journey is long and complicated partially justifies the multiplicity of Bible translations in English.

Today, we will summarize a few key 'big-picture' issues which help make sense of the modern plethora of Bible translations, and then spend our time looking at three concrete examples of how different translations handle a couple different passages. These test cases will allow us to see how translators address some of the difficulties raised in translation "in the wild" and see how different assumptions about what a translation should do play out in the end result.

Factors in why so many translations

Many factors contribute to why there are so many English translations on the modern scene. The following six reasons are some of the significant reasons.

1. Translation philosophy

You can think of "translation philosophy" as a set of guiding principles and 'rules of thumb' about how to solve the difficulties involved in translation. Each Bible translation project works out a translation philosophy. Modern translations are often done by (or at least reviewed by) a committee, thus the translation philosophy aims to get all the translators and editors trying to solve the difficulties in the same general way. *Translation philosophy* includes assumptions about the type of people you expect to read your translation, how languages convey meaning, as well as certain theological presuppositions. The simple fact is that people disagree over which translation philosophy is the best. This disagreement contributes to a multiplicity of translations.

While much could be discussed here, I want to draw attention to a couple aspects of translation theory that are relatively straight-forward and make noticeable impact on the translation.

Word for word vs. Thought for thought

In discussions of Bible translations, there are two main translation philosophies which you will hear about: word-for-word and though-for-thought.[2] Both names are utterly and completely misleading, but you have to call theories something. These names are good enough to use for basic discussion (although sorely lacking in their explanatory power to account for what actually happens in translations).

---

[1] Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*.
[2] Other names like "essentially literal" and "dynamic equivalence" are dressed up versions of these two basic philosophies.

In short, here is what they aim at:

> **Word-for-Word:** tries to adhere as closely as possible to the wording and structure of the original languages without sacrificing clarity.

> **Thought-for-Thought:** tries to be as clear and understandable as possible in translating the original languages without sacrificing accuracy.

You might say that these two approaches take the opposite track from each other. The "word-for-word" approach starts with the original language text and asks, "How little can we possibly change about the sentences and word choices and result in something that makes sense in English?" while the "thought-for-thought" approach asks, "How much like natural English can we translate without losing fidelity to the original?"

In practice, every translation is a mix of these sorts of considerations. Modern translations are largely an effort to hit some mid-point between these two poles of translation philosophy.

Differing "theories of the reader"
Every translation has a "theory of the reader." That is, it envisions who will read the translation, and shapes the translation toward this imaginary audience. Every translation actually makes a lot of assumptions about their readers. For instance, they assume things like:

- education level
- English literacy level
- What sort of English (register) they prefer to read/are able to read/etc.
- degree of prior biblical literacy
- what amount of ambiguity readers are willing to put up with
- foreign language experience

We could list more assumptions. The point here is that the way translator's translate is shaped by many assumptions of who the "ideal reader" for that translation will be.

2. Long history of English translation
One simple reason there are lots of English Bible translation is that the history of English translations starts back in 1380. We've been at this for over 600 years. In that time frame, lots of translations can see the light of day.

Furthering the impact of this long history of translation in English is the fact that English, for a variety of reasons, has become a major global language in the world today. The majority of people who speak and read English learn it as a second (or third, or fourth, etc.) language, not as their mother tongue. Many newer English translations aim to serve non-native English speakers, or speakers of "international English." This in part justifies many newer translations, aiming at niches within the English-speaking world.

A subfactor within this long history of translation is that we have a baked in cultural assumption that "new" = "relevant" and "old" = "irrelevant." It is hard to escape the impression that many translations in the past 50 years are just striving to be new because people strongly believe that we need something new.

3. Changes in Scholarship

Over time, scholarly consensus on certain issues changes. Sometimes, these changes affect our understanding of the Bible to such a degree that our translations need to be updated. Every translator or translation committee has to translate the whole text, regardless of how strong their knowledge and information is for any given part. Uneven knowledge or outdated knowledge can work its way into a Bible translation, only to be weeded out in later translations. Here are a couple of examples to illustrate.

Slave vs. Servant vocabulary

The bible was written in a time and place where slavery was normative. Regardless of how we feel about slavery, we need to make extensive usage of slavery vocabulary in translating both the OT and NT (this is a sub-part of a broader issue in translation where a social institution in the biblical world has no direct corresponance to the modern world; for a particularly acute version of this problem, imagine trying to do a bible translation for a culture which does not have sheep). For example, consider this note from the ESV preface:

> [The terms *'ebed* and *doulos* (Hebrew and Greek, respectively)] are often rendered "slave." These terms, however, actually cover a range of relationships that require a range of renderings—either "slave," "bondservant," or "servant"—depending on the context.

As understanding of certain aspects of ancient life and society grows and develops, we constantly have to ask our translations: are they communicating what we know about the past in terms which make sense to the present readers? Sometimes the honest answer is, "no, they aren't." When that is the case, it is time for a translation update.

Qumran OT texts

How the Qumran texts are handled is an interesting case study in how scholarly advances affect translations. The famous Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran are invaluable in many respects and raise a variety of questions in other respects. The OT biblical texts found at Qumran are not always identical to the OT Hebrew text which has been passed down through the ages that our OT is translated from (called the Masoretic Text). The Qumran texts predate our oldest copies of the Masoretic texts by as much as 1,000 years, which makes them of great interest to scholars studying the biblical text.

Every OT translation since their discovery and publication consults with the Dead Sea Scrolls, but their impact differs. At a more extreme end, consider the New American Bible, which says the following in its introduction:

> "The Masoretic text of 1 and 2 Samuel has in numerous instances been corrected by the more ancient manuscripts Samuel a, b, and c from Cave 4 of Qumran, with the aid of important evidence form the Septuagint in both its oldest form and its Lucianic recension."[3]

Especially in the OT, other ancient language translations of the Bible prove influential in how we understand certain portions of the Hebrew text. The Qumran texts just put the issue more pointedly in that they are Hebrew manuscripts from as old or older than our ancient language textual evidence of the OT picks up. How the evidence they provide is handled can affect what ends up being translated.

---

[3] page 43 xcx

The best way to handle gendered language has been a major area of controversy in Bible translation in the past few decades. This simply reflects the larger cultural conflicts over gendered language. You might think of the question from Bible translator's perspective as follows. There once was a time when an English speaker would call a generic person 'he' or 'him.' If you didn't know the gender of an individual, you just called them 'he.'

A holdover example from this way of talking is the way you respond when someone calls it cuts you off in traffic. The classic response, uses a generic masculine: "that guy is an idiot. He cut me off." In all likelihood, you have no idea whether the driver is a man or a woman. But that's irrelevant because on this pattern of speaking, the pronoun "he" actually just means "an unknown individual" without respect to their actual physical gender.

We have now largely entered a period of language usage in which generic masculines of this sort are no longer acceptable. Indeed, many speakers of Modern English find them difficult to understand. Younger people especially speak a version of the English language where the generic pronoun 'they' is used. To revisit the driving example, when someone cuts you off you now say: "That person cut me off. They're an idiot." If we don't know the gender of someone, we use 'they' more and more often. And many people even advocate using 'they' even when you know the gender of the person. That's a different discussion. The use of 'they' in this way is not yet a settled part of English, and maybe it never will be, but only time will tell.

A Bible translator has to consider how to deal with generic usages of masculine singular and masculine plural nouns and references that occur all throughout the Bible. Both Hebrew and Greek default to these generic masculine references. In a group of people, if there were men present, the words and pronouns used to refer to the group are masculine. These generic masculines were not meant to exclude women; rather, they were understood to be included within such expressions.[4]

Today, it is increasingly the case that women and girls who read the scripture don't assume they are included in a generic masculine reference because English continues to move farther and farther away from such usages.

First John 4.15 serves as a good example of the development on translations around the issue of gendered language. Compare here two different renderings of the NIV.

> 1973/84 NIV: If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

> 2011 NIV: If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.

Note the change from he/him in the 73/84 text to they/them in the 2011 text. While many older speakers of English tend to balk at using 'they/them' as a singular reference for a specific person, that is exactly what the NIV 2011 does here. It is the easiest way in contemporary English to get around using the 'he/him' which is reflected in the Greek text (Greek pronouns—and nouns in general—come in 3

---

[4] Whether such usage of language is "sexist" or not is probably not possible to answer. It is so widespread throughout the languages of the world that its origin is unlikely to be accidental.

gendered forms: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Pronouns almost always have the grammatical gender of the person they are referring to).

Because both Hebrew and Greek make extensive uses of generic masculine references, how a translation handles them results in quite extensive differences in wording throughout the Bible. Sometimes, the generic gender is theologically or literarily significant, and there is no easy or elegant way to deal with the difficulties.

There is no definitive way to solve the tension introduced by a consciousness of gendered language that differs from the consciousness of the text we are translating from. Every possible approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Because our language and social sensibilities differ from that of the original texts of the Bible, translation of gendered language is and will remain a difficult area to navigate and the way a particular translation approaches the issue has very noticeable outcomes.

4. Theological tradition

This contribution to the plethora of English translations is worth noting briefly. Some translations owe their existence to a particular theological tradition wanting its own formally recognized translation. This phenomenon stretches back into the Reformation era, with Protestant and Catholic translations. Modern translations done by translation committees are often ecumenical, trying to intentionally avoid theological tradition distinctives. However, such translations have been made in the past and I would not be surprised if more are made in the future.

5. Purpose it is intended for

A further factor we can deal with briefly is that different translations have different intended audiences (see Translation philosophy above). The intended audience shapes the way the translators translate.

- Bible aimed for public worship has to consider whether their translation sounds good when read out loud; a translation not aiming for such a place need give less concern to issues of cadence, rhythm, and ease of pronunciation.
- If a Bible is intended for kids to read, it will tend to be easier and avoid more difficult words and sentences
- A Bible aimed for the international market has to consider different reading abilities of non-native speakers of English, including different connotations of words in different areas of the world

6. Financial

While no Bible translation introduction is going to start this way, there are real financial and legal aspects involved in Bible translation. Bible translations, like all original translations, are considered intellectual property under US Law (and other international laws which are similar). The net effect is that the owner of the copyright of the translation can restrict how the translation is used, especially when financial transactions are involved.

Somewhere on the inside cover page of your Bible (or thereabouts), you should find a description of the usage permissions for your Bible (if you have an older Bible—like the KJV, for instance—which is out of copyright, you won't see this). Usually there is a notice something like this:

> "The NIV® text may be quoted in any form (written, visual, electronic or audio), up to and inclusive of five hundred (500) verses without the express written permission of the publisher,

providing the verses quoted do not amount to a complete book of the Bible nor do the verses quoted account for twenty-five percent (25%) or more of the total text of the work in which they are quoted."[5]

"The ESV text may be quoted (in written, visual, or electronic form) up to and inclusive of one thousand (1,000) verses without express written permission of the publisher, providing that the verses quoted do not amount to a complete book of the Bible nor do the verses quoted account for 50 percent or more of the total text of the work in which they are quoted."[6]

Bible publishers, as you can see, allow a good bit of leeway for free usage of the text of the Bible (which makes sense) for general, personal, and corporate use. **However**, if you want to use the text in a commercial endeavor (meaning you are selling anything which uses the translation), things get murkier.

So, if you want to make denominational Bible study material, for example, you either need to use an out of copyright text or pay to use someone else's text. The third option? Run a translation which you own the copyright of.

It is unlikely that financial considerations are the main reason behind any particular translation, but to pretend like they don't exist would be fooling ourselves.

Comparisons

To do any adequate justice in comparing translations requires arduous, long, and incredibly tedious work, comparing how verses unfold on a word-by-word basis. In the effort to avoid that, I have selected a few examples of different texts to compare. These examples highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches to translation. That is key to keep in mind. Different approaches have strengths and weaknesses. Every approach has to make certain trade offs.

Gen 4.1

Here are a variety of translations on the first half of Genesis 4.1 (notice how the punctuation at the end differs—just one of many differences in how the translations approach their task):

NIV	Adam *made love*[7] *to* his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.
ESV	Now Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain,
LEB	Now Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and
NET	Now the man *was intimate with* his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.
KJV	And Adam *knew* Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain,
MSG	Adam *slept with* Eve his wife. She conceived and had Cain.

The Hebrew verb in question here is ידע (*yd'*). It is usually translated "to know." This general meaning 'to know' appears in 14 different semantic nuances, across a variety of different semantic domains.[8] The

---

[5] NIV permission notice.

[6] ESV permission notice.

[7] This is the most recent revision of the NIV. The 1984 NIV used "lay with his wife."

[8] Accessed: *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew,*
https://semanticdictionary.org/semdic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en&lemmaIndex=2772&startPage=1
10/25/2022. That is just a fancy way of saying it has several distinct usages in different contexts.

basic problem raised in Genesis 4.1 is that, outside of Bible-influence, "to know" in English is not regularly used with a meaning of 'have sex with.'[9] This mismatch between the range of meaning for the Hebrew verb and the most similar in meaning English verb raises a simple problem every translation must solve: follow the Hebrew idiom and risk making readers exert the extra effort to read (and when you make them exert extra effort time and time again, they may just give up), or go with an English expression that speaks directly to the modern reader.

In these translations cited above we find four options: (1) knew, (2) made love to, (3) was intimate with, and (4) slept with.

If my goal in translating was to immediately convey the point of the Hebrew, I would certainly go with 2-4 as an option. "Was intimate with" sounds a little stiff to me, so I would use either "made love to" or "slept with." Either of those are good translations in that they bring the thought of the idiom from Hebrew into the thought of a modern English idiom. But there is a catch. These options thrive in offering immediate accessibility to the English reader, but they sacrifice possible inner-Hebrew connections.

"To know" (ידע) is an important word which is used over and over again in a wide variety of circumstances. Part of the superstructure of meaning behind "to know" in the Hebrew of Genesis 4.1 is an idea that the act of physical union with a spouse is an act of learning, of gaining knowledge/understanding. Far from a transactional view of sex, this is deeply relational and deeply interpersonal. Also, the idea of knowledge as an intimate and experiential reality comes to light here. With this sort of background, when we come to a passage like Psalm 1.6,

> For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (ESV)

we are well in position to ponder what God "knowing" the way of the righteous might mean.

Further, a translation like "made love to," which works well as an English idiom, runs the risk of obscuring the Hebrew thought world animating the OT. "Made love to" is not used as a Hebrew idiom for "have sex with." Though it is a natural expression in English, it wasn't in Hebrew. Such a translation communicates clearly to an English reader about the intent of the Hebrew idiom which is used, but "made love to" brings obscurity to the associational possibilities of meaning which grow in connection with other passages. That is, with such a translation we are not in position to see the different ways that "to know" interrelate in the Hebrew OT.

Hebrew does use the idiom "to sleep with,"[10] so using that as an English translation matches a possible Hebrew idiom. However, that is not the Hebrew idiom here, so it creates problems with possible connections between this passage and others.

All these translations choices avoid many other ways, both vulgar and elevated, to refer to the act of sexual intercourse. The idiom in Hebrew is not crass, so a translation like "had sex with," or "mated"—not to mention many other more colorful options which would communicate clearly in English—are ruled out in that they introduce a level of casual and/or vulgar meaning into the text which is not there. Likewise, to say, "Adam had intercourse with his wife" introduces a range of restraint which is not there.

---

[9] Dictionary.com marks this usage as archaic. Accessed: https://www.dictionary.com/browse/know 10/25/2022.
[10] The obviousness of this idiom is so deeply rooted in human biological and relational experience that it would be quite surprising if it did not appear in a language.

Which is the best translation? All of them have points in favor, and weak spots. In "the wild," it is often better not to ask which translation is 'best,' but rather which translations work and which ones don't.

This example is merely illustrative of the sorts of decisions which have to be made over and over again. We might not think Gen. 4.1 is that difficult. After all, it becomes obvious what "know" means by the end of the verse. The bigger question at stake, which different translation philosophies answer differently, is this: should readers of an English Bible have to learn Greek and Hebrew idioms in order to understand the English Bible? And if "yes," which ones? We may keep "know" in Genesis 4.1, but is anyone going to argue for a painfully literal rendering of the question the demoniacs pose to Jesus in Matthew 8.28 (and parallels): "what to us and to you?"[11] This turn of phrase is rather unclear in English. Should we reduce the idiom into something with similar meaning in English, or respect the idiom as present in the Greek text and expect people to figure out what it ought to mean?

The way a translation answers these thousands of little questions about bringing idioms across languages will shape their end translation in thousands of little ways.

Proverbs 27.6

Poetry provides many unique challenges in any translation. Poetry presses normal language usage to the breaking points in terms of economy of language, rhythm, patterns, the sound of the language, and density of imagery. While there is no hard and fast distinction between poetry and prose, they are decidedly different types of literature.[12] Different translations handle poetry in different ways. As a sample of some of the difficulties which poetry poses, consider with me Proverbs 27.6:

ESV	Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.
NET	Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are excessive.
NIV	Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.
VOICE	Wounds inflicted by the correction of a friend prove he is faithful; the abundant kisses of an enemy show his lies.
GNT	Friends mean well, even when they hurt you. But when an enemy puts his arm around your shoulder—watch out!
MSG	The wounds from a lover are worth it; kisses from an enemy do you in.

I have arranged these translations into two groups: those which try to maintain the poetry of the proverb (first three), and those which go for a clear and simple explanation in English (second three).[13]

---

[11] Greek: τί ἡμῖν καὶ σοί.

[12] The distinction between poetry and prose is difficult in any language. There are extensive debates about the nature of Hebrew poetry in the scholarly world.

[13] There is some difficulty with construing the Hebrew in the second half of the line. This adds a further layer of complication which we will not deal with here.

Among the first three, the NIV is the most interpretive. It reduces the possible ways to understand how wounds from a friend might be "faithful" to one idea: they can be trusted.[14] This is more interpretive than simply saying, "faithful are the wounds of a friend," which invites and requires the reader to consider for themself the various ways in which wounds given by a friend can be a good thing.

The basic dynamics of the proverb, though, are brought through in the first three translations: wounds from a friend can (paradoxically) be a good thing; blessings from an enemy can (paradoxically) be a bad thing. The proverb poetically invites us to consider how these paradoxes are true.

The second group of three translations aims to make the proverb simple and straight-forward. Rather than inviting the reader into thinking about and figuring out the proverb, they provide an already interpreted version, and in prose form, to boot! The VOICE even goes so far as to specify that the wounds are good when inflected by "the correction of a friend," which is an expansive explanatory insertion into the text. Further, the "prove he is faithful" resolves in what way wounds from a friend are faithful. But that is not the only possible meaning of the proverb. The GNT completely leaves behind the Hebrew proverb, inserting a simple prose explanation that friends mean well for you, but watch out for enemies even when they are nice. The Message's, "kisses from an enemy do you in," makes an interesting poetic pairing with its first line, maintaining the paradox: getting hurt by a friend can be worth it, but getting kissed by an enemy is a death knell. In this way, it is more "proverbial" than the other two of the bottom set, but it also reduces the proverb to a clear interpreted version.

Poetry is challenging to translate under any circumstances. Translated poetry is rarely good poetry, unless the translator takes a good deal of liberties in crafting good poetry in the process of translating. This example from one verse in Proverbs highlights one of the ways that Bible translations separate among themselves in handling poetry. In effect, one approach intentionally de-poetizes the Bible, giving an interpreted, prose version of the text in its place. Another stream aims to capture the ambiguity and openness which is present in the original texts. De-poetizing a text while translating pays off in clarity and ease of reading. Aiming for a poetic translation can suffer in that the poetic images in one language may be different in meaning from those in another.

Once again, there is no decidedly correct way to translate. While I prefer the attempt to retain the poetry and ambiguity, even this approach suffers its own weaknesses.

Galatians 2.4-5

To round out the examples, here is one from the New Testament which exhibits an interesting peculiarity. Galatians 2.4-5 is an independent clause (a "sentence," in common parlance). But in the original Greek these two verses are actually a sentence fragment.[15] There is no explicit subject and no main verb in the sentence (the next sentence, beginning with v. 6, is also grammatically irregular). As one grammarian puts it, it is "difficult to determine what Paul was driving at in the opening clause in

---

[14] Hebrew, נֶאֱמָנִים. The word, niphal from אמן, falls into the "confidence" or "faithful" sub-domain. See https://semanticdictionary.org/semdic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en&lemmaIndex=492&startPage=1 10/25/2022.

[15] While it is not common, irregularities (what we could uncouthly call "errors" in grammar and usage) in the usage of Hebrew or Greek are not that unusual in the OT and NT. This passage from Galatians represents a problem which translators must deal with on more than a few occasions.

G[alatians] 2:4f."[16] From the point of view of Greek, these two verses are the opening of a thought that is never closed. Translations must do something with this fact. How many readers are going to be forgiving of translators if, on close examination, they realize the translators didn't even manage a complete sentence? Since English Bibles are often studied very closely, this is a real possibility translators need to consider. Unless the reader is conversant in Greek and can see that the sentence is a fragment in Greek (thus an English fragment is an appropriate translation), a sentence fragment will most likely be considered an error.

Compare how the following translations handle this passage:

ESV	4 Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— 5 to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.
NET	4 Now this matter arose because of the false brothers with false pretenses who slipped in unnoticed to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, to make us slaves. 5 But we did not surrender to them even for a moment, in order that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.
NIV	4 This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. 5 We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.
VOICE	4 Some people who were pretending to be our brothers and sisters were brought in to spy on the freedom we enjoy in the Anointed One, Jesus—their agenda was clear: they wanted to enslave us. 5 But we didn't give in to them. We didn't entertain their thoughts for a minute! We resisted them so the true gospel—and not some counterfeit—would continue to be available to you.
GNT	4 although some wanted it done. Pretending to be believers, these men slipped into our group as spies, in order to find out about the freedom we have through our union with Christ Jesus. They wanted to make slaves of us, 5 but in order to keep the truth of the gospel safe for you, we did not give in to them for a minute.
MSG	While we were in conference we were infiltrated by spies pretending to be Christians, who slipped in to find out just how free true Christians are. Their ulterior motive was to reduce us to their brand of servitude. We didn't give them the time of day. We were determined to preserve the truth of the Message for you.

Among these six translations, the ESV is the only one which makes an attempt to treat this passage as a fragment and not introduce a main subject or main verb. All the rest, in one way or another, resolve this ambiguity. The GNT and VOICE treat "these men/some people" as the subject. The NET and NIV introduce "this matter" as a subject. Finally, in a reworking of the text, the Message introduces "we" as the subject. None of these translations are inherently objectionable; they all show a different approach to translation at work.

---

[16] F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Revision of the Ninth-Tenth German Edition Incorporating Supplementary Notes of A. Debrunner*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), sec. 467.

The ESV attempts to replicate the Greek syntax to the point that it produces an English sentence fragment which closely approximates the Greek.[17] This is transparent to the text in that it is not clear in the Greek what Paul assumes the subject for his incomplete sentence is. However, it could be the case that the subject and main verb are considered so obvious as to be implied from context, in which case the ESV's approach short-changes the reader.

The NIV, GNT, and VOICE all supply a clear subject and verb for the passage, though differing on the details. The Message distinctly reformulates the passage and translates it as part of a larger chunk, rather than dealing with the text on a sentence-by-sentence basis. What all these approaches share, though, is that in providing a clear subject and verb they make an interpretive decision which the reader is unaware of and unable to get behind. Of course, all translation requires interpretation, and any translation is an interpretation (along with opening certain interpretive possibilities and closing others). One way to divide translations is how willing they are to close possible interpretive options at the cost of increasing clarity for English readers. For example, the way The Message handles this passage requires these false brothers to be present at the discussion which Paul is having with a few of the Jerusalem leaders in Jerusalem. This is a possible reconstruction of the situation from the text, but certainly not the only reasonable way to understand the flow of the text. But a reader of The Message is pushed down one interpretation. The cost of pursuing clarity is that it often obscures real ambiguity in the originals.

Conclusion on comparisons

These three comparisons are meant to be illustrative. As mentioned above, comparing translations is arduous work. Most people well-equipped to compare translations are the very people who do original language work anyways, so why bother spending the time comparing translations point by point? But these few examples do illustrate key cleaving points in the way that different translation philosophies deal with the complex issues involved in transferring meaning across languages.

No single approach can bear the weight of the burden. On the positive side, we have lots of translations going at the same difficult task from a variety of different perspectives. That they end up sounding different from time to time usually reflects different possibilities within the text which a translation chose to emphasize at the expense of other possibilities. As a general rule, the more a translation pushes for clarity in English, the more often it is going to shut down interpretive possibilities in the original (but, sometimes attempts to carry across ambiguity into English also shut down interpretive possibilities or result in a translation which is more vague than original readers would likely have heard it).

The bummer with many translations is that there is no definitive way forward. The blessing, though, is that there are lots of good ways forward.

Picking a translation

In coming to the end of a brief 2-week study on why there's so many English translations, the obvious payoff question that everyone is expecting an answer from is, "What is the best translation?"

If you've been listening closely so far, I'm sure it will not surprise you that I am not going to say there is a best translation to use. In *Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien writes, "Go not to the elves for counsel, for

---

[17] The ESV provides closure in its translation of v. 5, which makes the translation feel like a complete sentence, even though it technically isn't.

they will say both no and yes." That is largely my answer when it comes to Bible translations. There is no perfect translation; every translation is a mix of strengths and weaknesses, and sometimes the strengths are weaknesses and weaknesses are strength.

I'll give you my "top 3" translations and then a few honorable mentions.

Top 3, in alphabetical order (so as to guard against the suggestion that I have ordered them in rank of preference):

- Christian Standard Bible (middle of the road reading difficulty)
- English Standard Version (hardest to read)
- New International Version (easiest to read)

Honorable mentions:

- NET Bible
  - o An often lively translations which includes thousands of notes discussing the translation decisions; most of these notes are aimed at specialists, but the translation itself is nice, readable, and often times invigorating. This translation was conceived of and carried out as an online Bible (hence the name NET).
- The Message
  - o While I would not recommend The Message as a primary Bible, it is an engaging and provocative translation to check out from time to time. It is available to read for free in many places online
- NKJV
  - o If you are hungry to remain strongly in the KJV stream, the NKJV is probably the best bet. It deals with the main difficulties raised by the KJV by updating the English forward a couple hundred years (though still not idiomatic modern English)

There are lots of good translations. My recommendations here are limited by my experience. I don't spend my spare time reading as many English translations of the Bible as I can. I have used all of these translations above with regularity, and so am willing to speak to them.

In practical terms, here's some advice for using translations. I would suggest you primarily read from one translation. This will help you get used to that translation and be able to exploit its strengths to the utmost. It is good, though, to periodically read from other translations. It can be like a breath of fresh air to come back to a familiar passage and have it opened up in a different way by a different translation. Also, when you are in a position where you're doing close Bible study, I recommend consulting several translations. This allows you to see many of the interpretive decisions which a translation makes based on its particular approach.

While I gave my top three translations above, I will close with this note. Any major translation in English today is a good translation to use.[18] Note the parameters in which the translation was made. A

---

[18] I hasten to add, "Any good Christian translation," so as to rule out the bible used by the Jehovah's witnesses, which is a doctored up KJV done to support various heretical slants and views, not on the merit of understanding the original languages.

translation that was made for kids to read is not the best translation for you to pick as an adult, but would make good sense for you to give to a child. Within that broad advice, the field is really open.

While there is only one path to salvation, there are many good paths towards engaging with the biblical text.