

## *Week 4: Tools to Help You Along the Way*

I. Now that you have a basic understanding both of presuppositions and context, you are fast on your way to becoming a great interpreter of scripture! However, without the proper tools, you will only be slowed down in your quest to correctly exegete and understand the Bible. Thus, you need to understand what tools are helpful, and what ones should probably be avoided!

### II. Translations:<sup>1</sup>

A. The translation you use plays a significant role in the hermeneutical enterprise. This is because translations differ in their philosophies of interpretation. In other words, the scholars who translate various Bibles (e.g. the NASB, NIV, NRSV, etc.) have different theories of what they are striving for in the translation process. The following are three predominant theories of translation today, along with some of their strengths and weaknesses.

1. *Formal Equivalency/Literal* – This theory of translation emphasizes the original language and word order, and renders the most “literal” sense of the text.

a. Strength – The best thing about this translation theory is that it leaves interpretation up to the interpreter, and does not attempt to bridge the interpretive gap for him or her in translation.

b. Weakness – However, this theory’s strength is also its greatest weakness, in that it maintains the greatest historical distance. In other words, it can be “woodenly” literal, giving the reader no help in understanding foreign expressions and idioms. Thus, this theory does not help us in seeing equivalent figures of speech that we could better understand.

2. *Dynamic Equivalency/Thought for Thought* – This theory of translation places emphasis on finding equivalent concepts in the translated language, while attempting to stay faithful to the sense of the text in its original language.

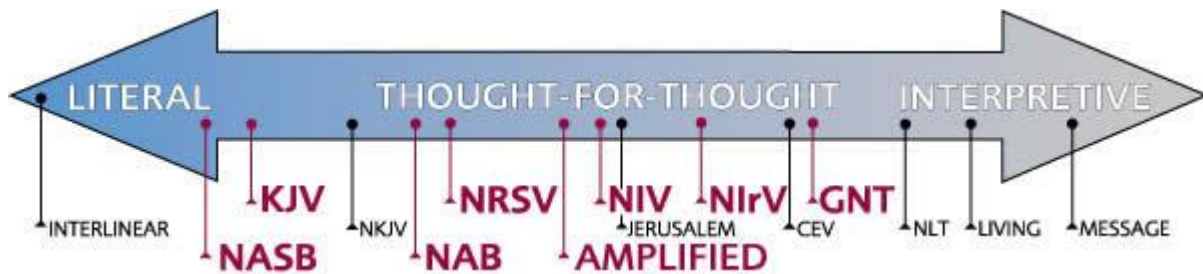
a. Strength – The translation is generally reliable in conveying the original sense, and at times helps tremendously in bridging the language gap between the 1<sup>st</sup> century world and the world of today.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this is taken from *Ibid.*, *Hermeneutics TTBE* 517, 2.

- b. Weakness – However, the theory can at times lead to over-interpretation by the translators, conveying meanings foreign to the intent of the original author (N.B. the translation of σαρκος as “sin nature” in the NIV).
1. *Free/Paraphrase* – In an attempt to overcome historical distance, the translation theory emphasizes simplicity and clarity in translation rather than precision.
    - a. Strength – Because the theory emphasizes simplicity, it often renders a text that is very easy to read, and sometimes is quite effective in bridging the historical gap between the Bible and us (e.g. Phillip’s translation of Romans 12:1-2).
    - b. Weakness – However, in trying so hard to lessen the historical gap, the theory often produces translations which are far closer to an interpretation of scripture than the inspired text (e.g. The Message).

B. The following chart<sup>2</sup> shows where various translations fall on the spectrum of translation theory:



B. A Few Notes Regarding Translations:

1. If you want a Bible that is true to the original languages, and yet effectively bridges historical gaps, the English Standard Version<sup>3</sup> (ESV) is an excellent choice.
2. However, many of the formal equivalent Bibles (excluding the KJV) are excellent study Bibles, as they allow the interpreter the most room in interpreting scripture.
3. Fee and Stuart note that it is wise to have a number of translations when reading, so as to compare them and see where translation issues exist.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it might be good to obtain a Bible from each of the different schools of translation theory (e.g. the

<sup>2</sup> Mardel.com, Translation Chart, available at: <http://www.mardel.com/site1/products/bibles/chooseable.cfm>.

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, *How to Read the Bible*, 43-44.

NASB, NIV, and NLT), and see the different ways they render a passage. This will prove tremendously helpful in evaluating interpretive options.

4. A Few Translations to Avoid:

- a. *The Message* – While it is incredibly easy to read, and often gives very inventive and interesting renderings to the text, it violates a fundamental rule of translations: specifically, that a minimal (i.e. as little as possible) amount of meaning should be added/taken away from the text in translation. *The Message* often adds/takes an enormous amount of meaning to Biblical text, and thus is a poor translation on a fundamental level. In many ways, this Bible should be viewed more as devotional literature than as scripture.
- b. *The King James Version* – While it is by far the most popular translation historically, and has exerted an impressive influence on bible translation (not to mention the English language), the KJV is ultimately an archaic translation. Its language is outdated (and sometimes grammatically incomprehensible), and it is based on late manuscripts which had accumulated the mistakes of thousands of years of copying.<sup>5</sup>

5. Hopefully these insights have given you some direction as to what translations will benefit you most in the process of interpretation.

## II. Other Tools

- A. For historical background, it is helpful to have a basic Bible dictionary.<sup>6</sup>
- A. For word meanings, it is helpful to have both a good expository dictionary<sup>7</sup> and a concordance.<sup>8</sup> The dictionary will help in giving you a *general* sense of the word under consideration, and the concordance is indispensable in helping you to see how a particular word is used in various contexts.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>6</sup> Fee and Stuart note, G.W. Bromiley ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), Merrill Tenney ed., *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), and J.D. Douglas ed., *New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary* (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> *Zondervan NASB Exhaustive Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). It is important to note that word studies are of only limited value. D.A. Carson notes that, "It is very doubtful if profound understanding of any text or of any theme is really possible by word studies alone." (quoted in Ibid., *TTBE* 517 *Hermeneutics*, 8).

- B. Good commentaries can also be helpful in providing information unavailable from a reading of the English text.<sup>9</sup> However, it is important to note that commentaries should only be used *after* one has gone through the process of interpreting a given passage.
- D. Now that we have an idea of some of the tools helpful in the interpretive process, we can see why good tools are essential in interpretation.

### ***Case Example 5: 1 Corinthians 7:1***

This verse has caused a good deal of confusion, as one can see in comparing some of the ways translators have rendered it.

NASB – “It is not good for a man to touch a woman.”

NIV – “It is good for a man not to marry.”

GNB – It is good for a man not to marry.”

LB – “It is good for a man not to marry.”

NAB – “A man is better off having no relations with a woman.”

ESV – “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with woman.”

What is this verse trying to say? Is it saying that men would be better off not touching women? Is it saying that celibacy is inherently better than marriage? Is it trying to say something about sex in the context of marriage? What is going on? First, it is important to note that the expression “to touch” used here is consistently used in antiquity as a euphemism for sexual relations.<sup>10</sup> This idea also seems supported by the immediate context (7:1-5). Thus, the NAB and ESV come closest to the original sense of the text. The NASB probably leaves too much to the imagination, and the NIV, GNB, and LB are deliberately misleading! The importance of a good translation should be obvious from this example.

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<sup>9</sup> For good technical commentaries which are also moderately evangelical, see the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Paternoster), and the *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas/Nashville: Word/Thomas Nelson). For a more moderately technical commentary series, see the *New International Commentary on the Old Testament/New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). For a good application commentary, see the *NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan).

<sup>10</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 39.