CONTENTS

Forewords 9
Preface to the Third Edition 13
Preface to the Second Edition 15
Preface to the First Edition 16
Acknowledgments 20

Part 1: How to Read the Book — Basic Tools
1. Bible Translations 23
2. The Interpretive Journey 39
3. How to Read the Book — Sentences 51
4. How to Read the Book — Paragraphs 69
5. How to Read the Book — Discourses 91

Part 2: Contexts — Now and Then
6. The Historical-Cultural Context 115
7. What Do We Bring to the Text? 137
8. The Literary Context 149
9. Word Studies 163

Part 3: Meaning and Application
10. Who Controls the Meaning? 191
11. Levels of Meaning 203
12. The Role of the Holy Spirit 225
13. Application 235

Part 4: The Interpretive Journey — New Testament
Part 5: The Interpretive Journey — Old Testament

18. Old Testament — Narrative 333
20. Old Testament — Poetry 373
21. Old Testament — Prophets 397
22. Old Testament — Wisdom 421

Appendix 1: Inspiration and Canon 443
Appendix 2: Writing an Exegetical Paper 455
Appendix 3: Building a Personal Library 459
Scripture Index 493
Subject Index 501
Author Index 505
Introduction

For your birthday you get some extra cash and you decide to buy a new Bible. The local Christian bookstore should have what you want. As you enter the store and turn the corner into the Bible section, you immediately notice a plethora of choices. You see The Open Bible, The Thompson Chain-Reference Study Bible, The NIV Study Bible, The NRSV Access Bible, The Life Application Study Bible, The ESV Reformation Study Bible, The NKJV Women’s Study Bible, The KJV Promise Keepers Men’s Study Bible, The HCSB Study Bible, The Spirit-Filled Life Bible, and about fifty other possibilities. You didn’t know buying a new Bible could be so complicated. What should you do?

The first thing to know about selecting a Bible is that there is a big difference between the Bible version or translation and the format used by publishers to market the Bible. Packaging features such as study notes, introductory articles, and devotional insights are often helpful, but they are not part of the translation of the original text. When choosing a Bible, you will want to look past the marketing format to make sure you know which translation the Bible uses. In this chapter we will be talking about Bible translations rather than marketing features.

We have a chapter on Bible translations because translation itself is unavoidable. God has revealed himself and has asked his people to make that communication known to others. Unless everyone wants to learn Hebrew and Greek (the Bible’s original languages), we will need a translation. Translation is nothing more than transferring the message of one language into another language. We should not think of translation as a bad thing, since through translations we are able to hear what God has said. In other words, translations are necessary for people who speak a language other than Greek or Hebrew to understand what God is saying through his Word.
We begin our discussion of Bible translations by looking at how we got our English Bible in the first place. Then we will look back at the various ways the Bible has been translated into English from the fourteenth century to the present. Next we will turn our attention to evaluating the two main approaches to making a translation of God’s Word. Since students of the Bible often ask, “Which translation is best?” we will wrap up the chapter with a few guidelines for choosing a translation.

How Did We Get Our English Bible?

Kids ask the toughest theological questions. At supper one evening, right after hearing a Bible story on the Tower of Babel, Meagan Duval (age five at the time) asked, “Who wrote the Bible?” What a great question! Meagan’s question is actually part of a larger question: “How did we get our English Bible?” or “Where did the English Bible come from?” Since the Bible was not originally written in English, it is important to understand the process God used to get the English Bible into our hands. Below is a chart illustrating the process of inspiration, transmission, translation, and interpretation.

---

1. For a clear and engaging introduction to how the Bible came to be, see Clinton E. Arnold, *How We Got the Bible: A Visual Journey* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
We left you hanging regarding Scott’s answer to his daughter, Meagan. Using the language of a five-year-old, he tried to explain that God wrote the Bible and that he used many different people to do so. The Bible is entirely the Word of God (divine authorship), but it is at the same time the writings of human authors. John Stott clearly describes the divine-human authorship of the Bible:

Out of whose mouth did Scripture come, then? God’s or man’s? [Sounds a lot like Meagan’s question.] The only biblical answer is “both.” Indeed, God spoke through the human authors in such a way that his words were simultaneously their words, and their words were simultaneously his. This is the double authorship of the Bible. Scripture is equally the Word of God and the words of human beings. Better, it is the Word of God through the words of human beings.2

God worked through the various human authors, including their background, personality, cultural context, writing style, faith commitments, research, and so on, so that what they wrote was the inspired Word of God. As Paul said to Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). God’s work through human authors resulted in an inspired original text.

As you might expect, in time people wanted to make copies of the original documents of Scripture (we refer to the originals as the autographs). Then copies were made of those first copies, and so on. As a result, although the autographs no longer exist, we do possess numerous copies of the books of the Bible. For example, there are over five thousand manuscripts (handwritten copies) of all or parts of the New Testament in existence today. Regarding the Old Testament, in 1947 Hebrew manuscripts of Old Testament books were discovered in the caves of Qumran near the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea Scrolls, as they are called, contain a portion of almost every book of the Old Testament. Prior to the discovery of the Scrolls, the oldest Old Testament manuscript dated to the ninth century AD. In other words, some of the copies found in 1947 were a thousand years older than anything previously known.

Before the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, all copies of the Bible were, of course, done by hand. As you know if you have ever tried to copy a lengthy piece of writing by hand, you make mistakes. The scribes who copied the copies of Scripture occasionally did the same. They might omit a letter or even a line of text, misspell a word, or reverse two letters. At times scribes might change a text deliberately to make it more understandable or even more theologically “correct.” Consequently, the copies we have do not look exactly alike. Make no mistake, scribes were generally very careful, and you can rest assured that there is no textual dispute about the vast majority of the Bible.3 Nevertheless, there are differences

---

3. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Introduction to Biblical Interpretation (Dallas: Word, 1993), 122, conclude: “Estimates suggest between 97 and 99 percent of the original NT can be reconstructed from the existing manuscripts beyond any measure of reasonable doubt. The percentage for the OT is lower, but at least 90 percent or more.”
in the copies, and we need some way of trying to determine which copy is more likely to reflect the original text. That responsibility falls to the discipline known as textual criticism.

Textual criticism (or analysis) is a technical discipline that compares the various copies of a biblical text in an effort to determine what was most likely the original text. The work of textual critics is foundational to the work of Bible translation, since the first concern of any translator should be whether they are translating the most plausible rendition of a biblical text. The work of the best textual critics is set forth in modern critical editions of the Bible. For the Old Testament the standard critical text is the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS)*. For the New Testament it is reflected in the latest edition of the United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament (GNT)* or Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece*. These critical editions represent the best scholarly consensus regarding the autographs, and they form the basis for almost all modern English translations.

At this point in the process a translator (or usually a translation committee) will translate the Bible from the source languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) into the receptor language (in our case, modern English). Here you enter the picture. As a reader you pick up your English Bible and begin to read and interpret.

Think for a moment about all that has happened before you ever catch a glimpse of the English text. God spoke through human authors who composed an original text. The originals were copied and recopied. Textual analysts did their best to determine which copies most likely resemble the originals and produced a modern critical edition of the Old and New Testament texts. The translators then went to work moving the meaning of the ancient biblical text into our own language so that we can hear the Lord speak to us through his Word.

**A Brief Survey of English Translations**

**English Translations prior to 1611**

The early Christian leader Jerome translated the Bible into Latin around AD 400 (dubbed the *Vulgate*, from a Latin word meaning “common”), and for a thousand years churches in the British Isles had to use this Bible. We have John Wycliffe to thank for the first complete translation of the Bible into English. The *Wycliffe Bible* (New Testament in 1380) was actually a word-for-word translation from Latin into English rather than from the original Hebrew and Greek. Wycliffe was accused of being a heretic and suffered persecution for his willingness to translate the Bible into the language of ordinary people. People were threatened

---

Bible translations  27

with severe penalties for even reading this forbidden Bible. Shortly after Wycliffe’s death in 1384, John Purvey produced a second (and much improved) edition. Purvey’s revision of the Wycliffe Bible (1388) dominated the English-speaking scene for some two hundred years—until the time of William Tyndale.

With the invention of the printing press in the mid-1400s, the renewed interest in the classical languages associated with the Renaissance, and the changes brought on by the Protestant Reformation (early 1500s), English Bible translation shifted into high gear. William Tyndale produced an English New Testament (1526) based on the Greek text rather than the Latin, but he did not live to complete his translation of the Old Testament. In 1536 Tyndale was executed and his body burned for his resolute commitment to Bible translation and his desire to “make the boy that drives the plough in England know more of Scripture” than many a scholar.5

Shortly before Tyndale’s death, Miles Coverdale produced a translation of the entire Bible into English (Coverdale Bible, 1535). Two years later John Rogers, an associate of Tyndale, completed the Matthew Bible, using the pen name Thomas Matthew. The Matthew Bible was in large part a completion of Tyndale’s work. Like Tyndale, John Rogers suffered martyrdom in connection with his commitment to Bible translation. In 1539 Coverdale revised the Matthew Bible, a revision that became known as the Great Bible because of its larger-than-normal size (approximately 16½ x 11 inch pages). The Great Bible was the first English translation authorized to be read in the Church of England and became popular with the people.

During the infamous reign of Mary I (“Bloody Mary”), many Protestants fled from England to Protestant havens of refuge such as Geneva, Switzerland, the home of John Calvin. While in Geneva, the Oxford scholar William Whittingham (with some help from others) made a complete revision of the English Bible. The popular Geneva Bible (1560) was “the Bible of Shakespeare, the Bible of the Puritans, and the Bible of the Pilgrim Fathers.”6 Yet because of the Calvinistic marginal notes in the Geneva Bible, the bishops of England were unwilling to use it in English churches. Yet since the Geneva Bible was superior to the Great Bible in translation quality, the bishops knew they needed a new translation. Matthew Parker, the archbishop of Canterbury, was asked to oversee the revision of the Great Bible. The Bishops’ Bible was completed in 1568. The Roman Catholic Church also needed an English translation with marginal notes in support of its doctrine. Although not of the same quality as the Protestant English translations (because of its close adherence to the Latin Vulgate), the Douai–Rheims Bible (1593) served this purpose.

The Authorized Version of 1611

Since none of the previous translations was able to satisfy all the different factions within the English church, in 1604 King James I authorized a new translation of the whole Bible for use in the churches of England. The leading university scholars in England produced the Authorized Version of 1611, commonly known as the King James Version. In order to generate the thousands of copies needed, two different printers were used. This resulted in two editions, named after their different translations of Ruth 3:15. The “He” edition read, “he [Boaz] went into the city,” while the “She” edition read, “she [Ruth] went into the city.” There were more than two hundred variations between these two editions as well as some mistakes.7 For example, the “He” edition says “then cometh Judas” in Matthew 26:36 instead of “then cometh Jesus.” The “She” edition repeats twenty words in Exodus 14:10. Even from the start it was difficult to determine the real KJV. The King James Version of 1611 also included the Apocrypha, a group of Jewish books recognized as canonical by Catholics but not by Protestants.

The goal of the KJV translators was to translate the original Greek and Hebrew texts into the language of ordinary people, with enough dignity to be used in church. From the original preface to the 1611 version we learn that these scholars were keenly aware that their new translation would bring opposition from those who refused to break with tradition. They wrote:

For was anything ever undertaken with a touch of newness or improvement about it that didn’t run into storms of argument or opposition?... [The king] was well aware that whoever attempts anything for the public, especially if it has to do with religion or with making the word of God accessible and understandable, sets himself up to be frowned upon by every evil eye, and casts himself headlong on a row of pikes, to be stabbed by every sharp tongue. For meddling in any way with a people’s religion is meddling with their customs, with their inalienable rights. And although they may be dissatisfied with what they have, they cannot bear to have it altered.8

In spite of the dangers associated with Bible translation, the translators were committed to the ongoing ministry of making the Scriptures available in the language of ordinary people.

So the Church should always be ready with translations in order to avoid the same kind of emergencies [i.e., the inability to understand because of a language barrier]. Translation is what opens the window, to let the light in. It breaks the shell, so that we may eat the kernel. It pulls the curtain aside, so that we may look into the most holy place. It removes the cover from the well, so that we may get to the water. ... In fact, without a translation in the common language, most

---

8. Ibid., 68–69.