Grasping God’s Word
Third Edition
To our wives, Judy Duvall and Donna Hays—
Our discussion of Song of Songs (chapter 22) summarizes our love for you
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This is a wonderful user-friendly book for serious readers who desire to journey into the world of the Bible in order better to understand and to live faithfully in today’s world. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays have chosen an apt title: *Grasping God’s Word*. The metaphor of grasping is a useful one for thinking through what is involved in biblical interpretation. As you embark on that lifelong journey, as well as the shorter one of studying the present work, it may be useful to keep four senses of the term in mind.

To begin with, “grasping” is an act of violence: “to seize greedily.” This is not what the present authors intended! It is, however, what many so-called “postmodern” readers think about the process of interpretation. In our disenchanted, disbelieving age, many no longer believe that there is a “meaning” in texts. Interpretation is more like a power struggle in which the reader imposes or forces his or her will on the text: *This is what it means to me*. In the opinion of many contemporary readers, we can never see beyond ourselves so as to attain an “objective” meaning. For these postmodern readers, there is no such thing as “correct” interpretation.

*Grasping God’s Word* lays great emphasis on the importance of observing the small details and the overall design of biblical texts. Yet Duvall and Hays are not unaware of the current skeptical trend. They well know that the observer-reader is not an impersonal recording device, but rather a person with a specific identity, history, and cultural background—all of which affect what one sees. Readers are not godlike, hovering in disembodied fashion over literary creations; no, readers, like authors, are rooted in particular historical situations—in what our authors call “towns.”

Not wreaking violence on texts is hard work, for it is all too easy to read our own ideas and prejudices into the text. Accordingly, the authors call readers both to undertake serious observation and to be honest about their background and their location. Readers must be prepared to have their values and beliefs called into question by the text. If they are not, they will grasp the Bible in the wrong way, twisting its words so that they conform to what we want them to say. This book is about avoiding such violent grasping.

Second, *Grasping God’s Word* is really about another kind of grasping: understanding. We grasp an idea or a story or a poem when we can make good sense of the words in their context. For only when an interpretation makes sense of the parts and the whole can one say: “I’ve got it.” To grasp, or understand, or “get it” is
to recognize what an author is saying and doing in his or her text. The present book equips serious readers to “get it.”

What is especially valuable is the authors’ attention to both the “parts” and the “whole” of the Bible. They are as concerned with the Bible’s words and sentences as they are with its paragraphs and books. Why? Because they rightly see that one can only understand the whole in light of the parts, and the parts in light of the whole. So we are not to grasp at the interpretative straws of word studies and proof texts. No, as the Israelites in ancient Egypt knew, straw can be used to make bricks. The “bricks” in this case are sentences and paragraphs that, when put together, are in turn used to make a variety of larger structures. One therefore finds chapters on word studies (the parts), as well as chapters on how to read the different kinds of “wholes” (e.g., the different types of literature) that make up the Bible. Indeed, the authors rightly devote almost half of the book to the practical challenges of interpreting and applying different kinds of biblical discourse.

Third, this book is about grasping in the very literal sense of hands-on and practical know-how. For this is a book for interpreters who are willing to get their hands dirty with concrete examples and practical assignments. Readers will receive the equipment, tools, and training in order to “correctly handle the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Everything the contemporary tourist needs to know and to take on the journey into the world of the Bible is provided herein, along with instructions on how to get back again — application!

In the fourth place, this book is about “grasping” God’s Word in the sense of holding on firmly. It is not enough merely to grasp God’s Word intellectually to make sense of it. No, we need to grasp God’s Word practically to make use of it. To what use should the Scriptures be put? One important answer lies within the text itself: “for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). We need not only to understand but to hold on to and obey God’s Word. For the Scriptures contain the words of eternal life — the words, when grasped, that enable the reader to lay hold of Jesus Christ, God’s living Word, in faith. Of course, grasping the Scriptures, or holding on to Jesus Christ in faith, is only a figure of speech. The truth of the matter is that when we grasp the message of God’s love for us, it — or rather, God — grasps us. This is the true end of biblical interpretation: to know as we are known.

In the final analysis, grasping God’s Word is a matter of life and death. Needy sinners, we need to let go of the cultural baggage that weighs us down and to hold firmly on to the words of Scripture for dear life. For it is only in Scripture that we come to know, and be known, by him who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are particularly indebted to a group of teachers that has traveled the road of biblical interpretation before us and influenced our thinking in a number of ways: Howard Hendricks, Elliot Johnson, Roy Zuck, Gordon Fee, Grant Osborne, D. A. Carson, Craig Blomberg, Kevin Vanhoozer, Mark Strauss, and Jack Kuhatschek. We acknowledge that we do not address some of the scholarly, theoretical discussions that are foundational to our hermeneutical method. We would direct the reader to Kevin Vanhoozer's Is There a Meaning in This Text? for the theoretical foundation on which our practical-oriented book is based.

We wish to thank our friends and fellow teachers for field-testing the book. We are especially grateful to Preben Vang, Randy Richards, and Dennis Tucker for reading a number of the chapters and offering valuable suggestions. In addition, we wish to thank especially David Croteau and Ernest Gray for their helpful suggestions at a recent ETS meeting.

We are also grateful to our editors and publishing friends. Jack Kuhatschek has been a genuine inspiration from the beginning of the project. His passion for encouraging people to encounter God's Word is contagious. We are most appreciative of Verlyn Verbrugge's expertise in biblical interpretation and keen eye for detail. Thanks also to Jack Kragt for his friendship and encouragement during the course of the project and to other members of the academic marketing team at Zondervan. To Katya Covrett, we say thanks for your support and encouragement and strong vision to see people connect with God's Word in a meaningful way.

To the many students, friends, and relatives who have given us suggestions and assisted us in proofreading, we say thanks. We are especially grateful to Daryl White, Sam Myrick, Brad Johnson, Ellis Leagans, Jim Hays, Tracey Knight, Jason Hentschel, and Julie Bradley.

Finally, we want to express deep appreciation to our wives, Judy Duvall and Donna Hays, and to our kids, Ashley, Amy, and Meagan Duvall, and Hannah and J. D. Hays, for persevering to the end of the project with us.
We have been truly humbled and heartened by the reception of both the first and second editions of *Grasping God’s Word* and *Grasping God’s Word Workbook*. Our goal all along was to write a book filled with clear explanations and plenty of examples to help people grow in their understanding of the Bible—something between the more popular guides and more advanced hermeneutics textbooks. We want to say up front that we are sticking with our original purpose in this third edition. In other words, our basic approach remains the same.

Nevertheless, from time to time resources need updating and you can expect a few changes. First, as you would expect, we have updated bibliographies, illustrations, cultural references, and appendices in light of what has been published since 2005. Second, we have shifted the tone slightly from “the Bible as a deposit of static truth that must be mastered and applied” to “the Bible as God’s great story that is to be understood and lived out.” We have not changed our view of the Bible, but we increasingly find value in thinking more about how we adjust to God and his ways rather than putting ourselves at the center in even the most subtle of ways. Third, we have moved the chapter on Bible translations to the first chapter since that topic interests students and they will benefit from knowing more about translations early on in the process. Fourth, we have made minor changes to several chapters (e.g., more on how to identify theological principles and more on *lectio divina*). Last, we have modified the Interpretive Journey slightly. In the first two editions, we had a four-step process for the New Testament and then added a fifth step when interpreting the Old Testament. Now we think it makes more sense to have five steps to the Interpretive Journey for all biblical genres:

**Step 1** - Summarize the original situation and the meaning of the text for the biblical audience.

**Step 2** - Measure the width of the river (i.e., the differences and similarities between the biblical situation and our situation).

**Step 3** - List the theological principles communicated by the passage.

**Step 4** - Consult the biblical map (i.e., see how our theological principle fits with the rest of the Bible).

**Step 5** - Grasp the text in our town (i.e., how individual Christians may live out the theological principles).

This puts more emphasis on reading the Bible canonically as a single, unified story.

Again, since many have profited from the book in the past and since the book
represents our convictions about how we should approach the Bible, we have not made major changes to *Grasping God’s Word*. With this third edition, we pray that in addition to talking about how to understand and apply the Bible to your life, you will be encouraged and challenged even more to “apply your life to the Bible” (Christopher Wright). May the Lord be pleased and honored by this resource.

J. Scott Duvall

J. Daniel Hays

Ouachita Baptist University

Arkadelphia, Arkansas
We have both been encouraged by the enthusiastic reception of *Grasping God’s Word* and *Grasping God’s Word Workbook* since their publication in 2001. We have been pleased to see *GGW* begin to fill the gap between popular guides to understanding the Bible and graduate-level hermeneutics texts. Our purpose in the original edition was to help serious readers (especially college and seminary students) learn how to read, interpret, and apply the Bible. Our original purpose has not changed, nor have we altered our basic approach of offering a practical, hands-on approach to guiding students in learning to read the Bible carefully and seriously, along with insights into interpreting the various literary types of the Bible. Nevertheless, enough has changed to warrant a second edition.

The second edition includes updating of bibliographies and resources, improvement of artwork, revising the chapters on word studies (ch. 8), Bible translation (ch. 9), levels of meaning (ch. 11), and prophecy (ch. 21), revising a number of exercises, and adding an appendix that deals with inspiration and canonicity. We are pleased that many have profited from the book in the past, and we pray that God will use the new edition to deepen your walk with him.

J. Scott Duvall

J. Daniel Hays

Ouachita Baptist University

Arkadelphia, Arkansas
If you are interested in studying and applying God’s Word, *Grasping God’s Word* may be just the book for you. We applaud your commitment to the Bible and thank you for taking a few minutes to find out about our book.

**Where Did the Idea Come From?**

As evangelical Christians, we hold that the Bible is important. But in spite of such claims, biblical illiteracy seems to be commonplace within our circles.1 At Ouachita Baptist University (pronounced “WASH-u-taw”), where the two of us teach, we have required the courses Old Testament Survey and New Testament Survey for all students—until recently, that is. Throughout the years, these traditional courses have supplied students with a healthy dose of historical background and theological content along with a nice touch of the devotional. It’s what we sensed our students were *not* getting that began to concern us. Were these courses helping them to see the overarching story of the Bible clearly enough to be able to live for Christ in a culture of competing stories? We also wondered whether we were teaching our students how to read the biblical story for themselves. How would they handle the Bible after leaving the class?

We therefore decided to make a change. We now require all students to take Survey of the Bible and Interpreting the Bible in place of the Old and New Testament survey courses. In Survey of the Bible we retell the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation in hopes of helping students see the big picture and understand how the grand story of Scripture answers the basic questions of life. In Interpreting the Bible, we teach students how to read, interpret, and apply the Bible for themselves. As the old adage says, we are trying to teach students how to fish rather than merely giving them fish to eat. The idea for *Grasping God’s Word* grew out of this change in classroom strategy for equipping students for life and ministry, and this book serves as the textbook for the Interpreting the Bible course.

**Why Is It Called Grasping God’s Word?**

We write as evangelicals. The full title bears this out: *Grasping God’s Word: A*

Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible. Our fundamental assumption is that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

This book emphasizes grasping the Bible. This is not to suggest that the Bible is nothing more than an object to be analyzed or scrutinized. On the contrary, our approach underscores careful reading and wise interpretation, culminating in commitment to apply what we know (John 14:21). A person who truly grasps God’s Word will find that Word grasping them.

Our approach is also hands-on. Through the abundant use of biblical examples and hands-on assignments, we hope to involve students in the nitty-gritty of biblical interpretation while guiding them through the process. Students should plan on getting their hands dirty as they learn how to dig deeper into God’s Word.

What Kind of Book Is Grasping God’s Word?
Most books on interpreting the Bible fall into one of two categories. There are plenty of popular guides to understanding the Bible (e.g., Howard C. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, Living by the Book; Rick Warren, Personal Bible Study Methods). At the other extreme you will find a number of excellent graduate-level hermeneutics texts (e.g., Walter Kaiser Jr. and Moisés Silva, Biblical Hermeneutics; William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, Introduction to Biblical Interpretation; Grant Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral). But there is not much in between to choose from. We hope that our book will help bridge that gap.

Grasping God’s Word is intended to help serious believers (especially college and beginning seminary students) learn how to read, interpret, and apply the Bible. We are writing for our students rather than interacting with our colleagues in the professional guild. Although our book was never intended to be a comprehensive manual on biblical hermeneutics, it goes well beyond the introductory guides. We have tried to give students plain-language explanations informed by the best of evangelical biblical scholarship.

This book has three basic components:

1. We give serious attention to reading the Bible carefully. Much of the hands-on flavor comes through in the opening chapters as we lay a foundation of thoughtful reading. This section may look a lot like the inductive Bible-study approach promoted by Robert Traina and Howard Hendricks.
2. We address general hermeneutical issues that confront every interpreter (e.g., preunderstanding, the role of the Holy Spirit).
3. We offer guidelines for interpreting and applying every major literary genre in both the Old and New Testaments.

How Is the Book Organized?
Grasping God’s Word is organized pedagogically rather than logically. A logical organization would begin with theory before moving to practice. But that is bor-
ing to students and they lose interest before they ever get to the “good stuff.” We have organized the book in a manner that motivates students to learn. Therefore, generally speaking, we begin with practice, move to theory, and then go back to practice. We have discovered in our teaching that after students have spent some time digging into the process of reading the Scriptures closely, they begin to ask some of the more theoretical questions. We are extremely encouraged by the positive reception that our students have been giving to the pedagogical arrangement. The book unfolds in five units:

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<th>More practical</th>
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<td>More theoretical</td>
<td>Part 2: Contexts — Now and Then</td>
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<td>Part 3: Meaning and Application</td>
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<td>Theoretical and practical</td>
<td>Part 4: The Interpretive Journey — New Testament</td>
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<td>Part 5: The Interpretive Journey — Old Testament</td>
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Each chapter begins with an attention-getting introduction before moving into a serious but nontechnical presentation of the topic. After the conclusion, we provide several assignments to help students do what we have been discussing. Here, for example, is a sampling of the contents for the chapters on “Contexts: Now and Then — Word Studies” and “The Interpretive Journey: Old Testament — Prophets”:

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<th>Contexts: Now and Then — Word Studies</th>
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<td>Common Word-Study Fallacies</td>
<td>The Nature of OT Prophetic Literature</td>
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<td>Choose Your Words Carefully</td>
<td>The Historical-Cultural and Theological Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determine What the Word Could Mean</td>
<td>The Basic Prophetic Message</td>
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<td>Decide What the Word Does Mean in Context</td>
<td>Interpretation and Application</td>
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<td>A Word Study: “Offer” in Romans 12:1</td>
<td>Special Problems — the Predictive Passages</td>
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<td>Conclusion</td>
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<td>Assignments</td>
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In three appendixes we provide a discussion on inspiration and canonicity, guidelines for writing exegetical papers, and suggestions for building a personal library (including a bibliography of recommended tools).
Workbook

There is also a student workbook that accompanies this textbook. The workbook is designed primarily to facilitate the completion of assignments by the students and the collection of those assignments by the professor (i.e., it has tear-out sheets). This textbook can be used without the workbook, but then the student (or the professor) must photocopy the assignments in order to turn them in. The directions in this textbook for the assignments sometimes indicate this need for photocopying. Using the workbook eliminates the photocopying step since the workbook sheets themselves can be turned in. If you are using the workbook, follow the assignment directions there and ignore the ones in this textbook. We think both teachers and students will find the workbook convenient and we recommend its use.

Website Resources for Teachers

We are also offering resources for professors who adopt the textbook for use in their class on the Zondervan website.² You need to be logged into the site to be able to use them.


These include:

- sample syllabi (including a course schedule)
- teaching schedule (instructions about day-to-day class sessions)
- chapter highlights for classroom presentations
- samples of graded assignments

Our prayer is that God will use this book to deepen your walk with him. To him be the glory!

² Our thanks to Zondervan for making these resources available to teachers on their website.
How to Read the Book—Basic Tools

Chapter 1 of *Grasping God’s Word* delves into the whole issue of Bible translation. How did we get our English Bible? What are the various ways the Bible has been translated into English? What are the two main approaches to making a translation? And which translation is the best?

In chapter 2 we introduce you to the process of reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible, a process that we refer to as the “Interpretive Journey.” This journey starts with a call to careful reading, because this is where we determine what the biblical text meant in its original context (*their town*). Before we are ready to apply that meaning to our lives (*our town*), however, we need to measure the width of the river that separates us from the world of the text. Once we have crossed the river, we will be able to apply the meaning of the Bible in relevant and reliable ways.

In chapter 3 we will start learning how to read with more insight and understanding. Superficial reading needs to be replaced by serious reading. We will show you how to observe smaller sections of text, looking for things like repeated words, contrasts, comparisons, lists, figures of speech, influential verbs, nouns, and conjunctions. Here we will learn how to read carefully at the sentence level. In chapters 4 and 5 we will move beyond the sentence level to the longer and more complex units of text—paragraphs and discourses. We will learn to detect things like dialogue, questions and answers, tone, connections between episodes, and story shifts. This is important to know if you really want to hear what God is saying through his Word.

In these first five chapters of *Grasping God’s Word* you will get your hands dirty as you learn about Bible translations and dig deeply into the process of biblical interpretation. The theory can wait for a few chapters as we learn how to read carefully and thoughtfully. This becomes the foundation for understanding what the Bible means and how we can live it out.
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.

There is a big difference between the Bible version or translation and the format used by publishers to market the Bible.
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 Duvall (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. (We never really intended this chart to look like a TV remote control.)

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**Translations are necessary for people who speak a language other than Greek or Hebrew to understand what God is saying through his Word.**

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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

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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.

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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

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8. Ibid., 68–69.
people are like the children at Jacob’s well (which was deep) without a bucket or something to draw the water with; or like the person mentioned by Isaiah who was given a sealed book and told, “Please read this,” and had to answer, “I can not, because it is sealed” (Isaiah 29.11).  

Early on, the King James Version faced severe attacks from certain quarters. Dr. Hugh Broughton, an eminent biblical scholar of that day, was famous for his caustic remarks: “Tell His Majesty that I had rather be rent in pieces with wild horses, than any such translation by my consent should be urged upon poor churches. The new edition crosseth me. I require it to be burnt.” In spite of such criticism, the King James Version eventually became one of the most widely used translations in the English-speaking world.

Because languages (including English) change over time, the King James Version itself needed to be revised. There have been many major revisions (1629, 1638, 1729, 1762), but the 1769 revision by Benjamin Blayney (known as the Oxford Standard Edition) is the edition still in use today. Many people are unaware that the 1769 edition of the KJV differs in thousands of places from the original 1611 edition. Language can change a lot in the span of 150 years.

Contemporary readers face two major obstacles with the KJV. First, the translators of the KJV worked from an inferior Greek text constructed from only a few, late New Testament manuscripts. Since the KJV first appeared, many older manuscripts have been discovered, and scholars contend that these older manuscripts are much more likely to reflect the original text. In contrast to the Greek text on which the KJV is based, scholars today are able to translate from a Greek text that draws on more than five thousand New Testament manuscripts, some dating back to the second century. Often differences between the KJV and contemporary translations such as the NIV are due to differences in the underlying Greek text. Here are several examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King James Version</th>
<th>New International Version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts 8:37</td>
<td>36 And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? 37 And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. 38 And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Those who insist that the KJV is the only legitimate English-language translation should consult James R. White, The King James Only Controversy, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2009).
A second obstacle is the KJV’s use of archaic English words and phrases. In addition to the use of obsolete terms such as “aforetime,” “must needs,” “howbeit,” “holden,” “peradventure,” and “whereto,” the KJV is filled with out-of-date expressions that either fail to communicate with contemporary readers or mislead them entirely. Consider the following:

- Genesis 43:25: “And they made ready the present against Joseph came at noon.”
- Exodus 19:18: “And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke.”
- 1 Samuel 5:12: “And the men that died not were smitten with the emerods.” [What are “emerods”?]
- Psalm 5:6: “Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing.”
- Luke 17:9: “Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.”
- Acts 7:44–45: “Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen. Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus [Joshua] into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David.”
- 2 Cor. 8:1: “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia.”
- James 2:3: “And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing.”
- James 5:11: “The Lord is very pitiful.”

The King James Version was a good translation for the early 1600s since it was written in the English of the early 1600s. Today, however, most of us would have trouble even reading a page of the original 1611 version, since it was printed in archaic English. See for yourself.

To argue that we should still use the 1769 KJV edition (the one that is popular today) is to admit the necessity of revising a translation. This is the case since there have been thousands of changes from 1611 to 1769; they are literally two different Bibles. Why not continue the process of revision by drawing on the latest in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King James Version</th>
<th>New International Version</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 John 5:7–8 7For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.</td>
<td>7For there are three that testify: 8the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. 22:19 19And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.</td>
<td>19And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
biblical scholarship and using language that today’s readers can understand? Anything less seems to violate the intent of those who translated the original King James Version. Let’s turn our attention now to what happened in Bible translation after 1611.

English Translations since 1611

A number of more recent English translations have some connection (direct or indirect) to updating the King James Version. The English Revised Version (1881 – 1885) was the first such revision and the first English translation to make use of modern principles of textual criticism. As a result, the Greek text underlying the ERV was different from that of the KJV. In 1901 American scholars produced their own revision of the ERV: the American Standard Version. Toward the middle of the twentieth century (1946 – 1952), the Revised Standard Version appeared. The goal of the RSV translators was to capture the best of modern scholarship regarding the meaning of Scriptures and to express that meaning in English designed for public and private worship—the same qualities that had given the KJV such high standing in English literature.

The New American Standard Bible (1971, rev. ed. 1995) claimed to be a revision of the ASV, but probably should be viewed as a new translation. The NASB (or NAS) is one of the more popular translations that adheres closely to the form of the original languages. The New King James Version (1979 – 1982) attempts to update the language of the KJV while retaining the same underlying Greek text that the translators of the KJV used (commonly called the Textus Receptus or TR).12 This preference for the TR distinguishes the NKJV from the other revisions, which make use of a better Greek text (commonly called an eclectic Greek text), based on older and more reliable readings of the Greek. The New Revised Standard Version, a thorough revision of the RSV, was completed in 1989 with the goal of being as literal as possible and as free as necessary. The accompanying chart illustrates the relationship between translations that are related in some way to revising the KJV.

12. The Textus Receptus (Latin for “received text”) was the Greek text published in the mid-1500s and used by the translators of the KJV. It was “received” in the sense that it was considered the standard Greek text of that time.
In addition to the KJV revisions noted above, committees of scholars have produced many other new translations in recent years. Catholic scholars have completed two major translations: the *New American Bible* (1941–1970) and the *Jerusalem Bible* (1966). What makes these significant is that not until 1943 did the Roman Catholic Church permit scholars to translate from the original Greek and Hebrew. Until that time, their translation had to be based on the Latin Vulgate. The *New Jerusalem Bible*, a revision of the Jerusalem Bible, appeared in 1985 and the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* in 2011. Both the *New English Bible* (1961–1970) and its revision, the *Revised English Bible* (1989), are translations into contemporary British idiom. The American Bible Society completed the *Good News Bible* in 1976 (also called *Today's English Version*). The translators of this version sought to express the meaning of the original text in conversational English (even for those with English as a second language). In the *New International Version* (1973, 1978, 1984), a large committee of evangelical scholars sought to produce a translation in international English offering a middle ground between a word-for-word approach and a thought-for-thought approach.


The *New Living Translation* (1996) is a fresh, thought-for-thought translation based on the popular paraphrase, the *Living Bible* (1967–1971). A recent attempt by an individual (rather than a committee) to render the message of Scripture in the language of today’s generation is *The Message* by Eugene Peterson (1993–2002). *The Message* claims to be a translation but reads more like a paraphrase aimed at grabbing the reader's attention. *God's Word Translation* (1995) uses the “closest natural equivalence” approach to translation in an attempt to translate the meaning of the original texts into clear, everyday language. The *New English Translation*, commonly referred to as the NET Bible (1998), offers an electronic version of a modern translation for distribution over the Internet. Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection (including translators and missionaries) can have access to this new version, not to mention that it is under continual revision.

*Today's New International Version* (2001) is an attempt to revise the NIV, using the best of contemporary biblical scholarship and changes in the English language. The *English Standard Version* (2001) is a word-for-word translation that uses the RSV as its starting point. Its goal is to be as literal as possible while maintaining
beauty, dignity of expression, and literary excellence. The *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (1999–2004) is a new Bible translation that promotes a word-for-word approach unless clarity and readability demand a more idiomatic translation, in which case the literal form is often put in a footnote. The *Common English Bible* (2011) is a fresh translation in the liberal Protestant tradition.

Most recently, the Committee on Bible Translation has revised the most popular of all modern English translations of the Bible, the New International Version. The NIV 2011 incorporates many of the improvements of the NIV (1984) made by the TNIV but with more precision in the area of gender-inclusive language.

Our survey of the history of English Bible translations running from the Middle English of John Wycliffe's 1380 translation to the NIV 2011 has been a brief one. We have only hit the high points in a long and rich history. We move now to explore the different approaches to Bible translation.

**Approaches to Translating God's Word**

The process of translating is more complicated than it appears. Some people think that all you have to do when making a translation is to define each word and string together all the individual word meanings. This assumes that the source language (in this case, Greek or Hebrew) and the receptor language (such as English) are exactly alike. If life could only be so easy! In fact, no two languages are exactly alike. For example, look at a verse chosen at random—from the story of Jesus healing a demon-possessed boy (Matt. 17:18). The word-for-word English rendition is written below a transliteration of the Greek:

*Kai epetimçsen autô ho Içsous kai exçlthen ap' autou to daimonion*

And rebuked it the Jesus and came out from him the demon

*kai etherapeuthç ho pais apo tçs hôras ekeinçs*

and was healed the boy from the hour that

Should we conclude that the English line is the most accurate translation of Matthew 17:18 because it attempts a literal rendering of the verse, keeping also the word order? Is a translation better if it tries to match each word in the source language with a corresponding word in a receptor language? Could you even read an entire Bible "translated" in this way?

The fact that no two languages are exactly alike makes translation a complicated endeavor. D. A. Carson identifies a number of things that separate one language from another:

14. The following is a summary of only a few differences discussed by Carson in *The Inclusive-Language Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 48–51.

- No two words are exactly alike. As we will learn in our chapter on word studies, words mean different things in different languages. Even words that are similar in meaning differ in some way. For example, the Greek verb *phileó,*
often translated “to love,” must be translated “to kiss” when Judas kisses Jesus in an act of betrayal (Matt. 26:48 in both KJV and NIV).

- The vocabulary of any two languages will vary in size. This means that it is impossible to assign a word in a source language directly to a word in a receptor language. This kind of one-to-one correspondence would be nice, but it is simply not possible.

- Languages put words together differently to form phrases, clauses, and sentences (syntax). This means that there are preset structural differences between any two languages. For example, English has an indefinite article (“a, an”), while Greek does not. In English adjectives come before the noun they modify and they use the same definite article (e.g., “the big city”). In Hebrew, however, adjectives come after the noun they modify and they have their own definite article (e.g., “the city, the big”).

- Languages have different stylistic preferences. Sophisticated Greek emphasizes passive voice verbs, while refined English stresses the active voice. Hebrew poetry will sometimes use an acrostic (ABC) pattern, which is impossible to transfer into English.

Since languages differ in many ways, making a translation is not a simple, cut-and-dried, mechanical process. When it comes to translation, it is wrong to assume that literal automatically equals accurate. A more literal translation is not necessarily a more accurate translation; it could actually be a less accurate translation. Is the translation “and was healed the boy from the hour that” better than “and the boy was cured at once” (NASB) or “and the boy was healed from that moment” (NET Bible)? Translation is more than just finding matching words and adding them up.

Translation entails “reproducing the meaning of a text that is in one language (the source language), as fully as possible, in another language (the receptor language).”

MARK STRAUSS

The form of the original language is important, and translators should stay with it when possible, but form should not have priority over meaning. What is most important is that the contemporary reader understands the meaning of the original text. When a translator can reproduce meaning while preserving form, all the better. Translating is complicated work, and translators often must make difficult choices between two equally good, but different ways of saying something. This explains why there are different approaches to translation. Individuals and committees have differences of opinion about the best way to make the tough choices involved in translation, including the relationship between form and meaning.

There are two main approaches to translation: the formal approach (sometimes labeled “literal” or “word-for-word”) and the functional approach (often called “idiomatic” or “thought-for-thought”). In reality, no translation is entirely formal or entirely functional. Since source and receptor languages differ, all translations will

have at least some formal features and some functional features. The situation is more like a scale, ranging from translations that are more formal to translations that are more functional (see below).

The more formal approach tries to stay as close as possible to the structure and words of the source language. Translators using this approach feel a keen responsibility to reproduce the forms of the original Greek and Hebrew whenever possible. The NASB, HCSB, and ESV use this approach. On the downside, the formal approach is less sensitive to the receptor language of the contemporary reader and, as a result, may appear stilted or awkward. Formal translations run the risk of sacrificing meaning for the sake of maintaining form.

The more functional approach tries to express the meaning of the original text in today’s language. Here the translator feels a responsibility to reproduce the meaning of the original text in English so that the effect on today’s reader is equivalent to the effect on the ancient reader.

Many contemporary translations utilize this approach, including the NLT and GNB. The functional approach is not always as sensitive as it should be to the wording and structure of the source language. When it moves too far away from the form of the source language, the functional approach runs the risk of distorting the true meaning of the text. The spectrum of translations might look something like this, moving from the more formal to the more functional.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More Formal</th>
<th>More Functional</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>NASB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASV</td>
<td>NKJV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>RSV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>NAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>NJB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCV</td>
<td>GNB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Message</td>
<td>CEV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the two main approaches to translation discussed above, you will encounter what is known as a paraphrase. Technically, a paraphrase is not a translation from the original languages at all, but merely a restatement or explanation of a particular English translation using different English words. The Living Bible (1967–1971), perhaps the most famous paraphrase, is Kenneth Taylor’s restatement of the ASV (1901) for the benefit of his children.

Another well-known paraphrase, the Amplified Bible (1958–1965), tries to give the reader an understanding of the many meanings contained in a particular verse through the “creative use of amplification.” For instance, John 11:25 reads: “Jesus said to her, I am [Myself] the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in (adheres to, trusts in, and relies on) Me, although he may die, yet he shall live.” This looks very much like the overload fallacy, which assumes that a word will bring its full range of meaning
into every context. The Amplified Bible leaves the misleading impression that the reader is free to choose from among the options presented.

Again, paraphrases are not translations from the original language. We do not recommend using paraphrases for serious study because they tend to explain rather than translate. We believe that the author’s meaning is encoded in the details of the text. In a paraphrase the “translator” makes far too many of the interpretive decisions for you. The result is that paraphrases add many things that are simply not in the Bible. Rather than translating the Word of God, paraphrases present a commentary on the Word of God. You should treat paraphrases like commentaries and use them as such. Our advice for those who are addicted to the Living Bible and other paraphrases is to switch to the New Living Translation.

Below are sample translations from across the spectrum, using 1 Corinthians 10:13. As you read the different translations, you will notice the subtle shift from an emphasis on form to an emphasis on function.

With all these contemporary translations to choose from, the natural question is “Which translation is best?” The next section is intended to help you choose a translation.

Choosing a Translation
We suggest the following guidelines for choosing a translation.

1. Choose a translation that uses modern English. The whole point of making a translation is to move the message of the original text to a language you can understand. History teaches us that languages change over time, and English is no exception. The English of John Wycliffe’s day or of 1611 or even of the late 1700s is simply not the same as the English of the twenty-first century. There is little to be gained by translating a Greek or Hebrew text into a kind of English that you no longer use and can no longer comprehend. For that reason, we recommend that you choose among the many good translations that have appeared within the last fifty years.

2. Choose a translation that is based on the standard Hebrew and Greek text. As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, the standard text for the Old Testament is the Bible Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS). For the New Testament the standard text is reflected in the latest edition of the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (GNT) or Nestle-Aland’s Novum Testamentum Graece. Along with the majority of scholars, we much prefer an eclectic original text rather than the Textus Receptus used by the KJV and the NKJV.

3. Give preference to a translation by a committee over against a translation by an individual. Translating requires an enormous amount of knowledge and skill. A group of qualified translators will certainly possess more expertise than any one translator possibly could. In addition, a group of scholars will usually guard against the tendency of individual scholars to read their own personal biases into their translation.

16. See explanation of this fallacy in chapter 9 on word studies.
17. For more on choosing a translation, see Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).
KJV
There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

NKJV
No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

ESV
No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to humanity. God is faithful, and he will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide a way of escape, so that you may be able to endure it.

HCSB
No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to man. God is faithful, and He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation He will also provide a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

NASB
No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

NRSV
No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

NET
No trial has overtaken you that is not faced by others. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tried beyond what you are able to bear, but with the trial he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

NIV (2011)
No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

TNIV
No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to us all. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

GWT
There isn't any temptation that you have experienced which is unusual for humans. God, who faithfully keeps his promises, will not allow you to be tempted beyond your power to resist. But when you are tempted, he will also give you the ability to endure the temptation as your way of escape.

NLT
But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it.

GNB
Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But God keeps his promise, and he will not let you be tested beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out.

The Message
No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.

Amplified (paraphrase)
For no temptation (no trial regarded as enticing to sin), [no matter how it comes or where it leads] has overtaken you and laid hold on you that is not common to man [that is, no temptation or trial has come to you that is beyond human resistance and that is not adjusted and adapted and belonging to human experience, and such as man can bear]. But God is faithful [to His Word and to His compassionate nature], and He [can be trusted] not to let you be tempted and tried and assayed beyond your ability and strength of resistance and power to endure, but with the temptation He will [always] also provide the way out (the means of escape to a landing place), that you may be capable and strong and powerful to bear up under it patiently.
4. Choose a translation that is appropriate for your own particular purpose at the time. When you want to read devotionally or read to children, consider a simplified, functional translation such as the New Living Translation or the New Century Version. If you are reading to nontraditional or unchurched people, consider the Contemporary English Version or The Message. If you are reading to people with English as a second language, consider the Good News Bible. If you are reading to a “King-James-only” church, consider the New King James. But for serious Bible study, we suggest the New American Standard Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, the English Standard Version, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, the NET Bible, and the New International Version (2011), depending on the audience and situation.

Conclusion

When it comes to studying Scripture, few things are as important as how the Bible has been translated. We can be thankful that God has used translators to get the message of the original text into our hands. Can you imagine the Christian life without your own copy of God’s Word? In the past many Christians have lived under those circumstances, but it would be difficult for us today. In spite of the many good Bible translations available to us, there is no such thing as a perfect translation. Furthermore, languages change over time. For these reasons, committed scholars and linguists must continue to work hard to get the message of the original text into a language that people can understand. Who knows, God may call you to serve as a Bible translator.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 1-1
Select five translations that we talked about in this chapter. Select a passage from the Bible (it must be at least two verses long) and write out how the translations render this passage. Next, mark or highlight the differences among the five translations. Write a paragraph summarizing what you have observed by comparing the translations.

Assignment 1-2
Answer the following questions:

a. Do you agree that the Bible is a divine-human book? Why or why not?

b. What is textual criticism? How is it possible to have a high view of the authority of Scripture and a positive view of textual criticism at the same time?

c. What is a Bible translation? Why is translation not a simple exercise? Describe the two main approaches to translation discussed in this chapter. Which approach do you feel most comfortable with? Why?
Introduction

A wrinkled old man in the mountains of Ethiopia sips coffee and peers through weathered, ancient bifocals at his worn Amharic Bible to read once again the story of David and Goliath. A middle-aged woman is bouncing along on a bus in Buenos Aires, reading and reflecting on Psalm 1. A young Korean executive, on his way home to Seoul from a business trip in Singapore, flies above the clouds at 35,000 feet, reading and pondering the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 5. And in a dorm room in San Diego, California, a young college student polishes off another Mountain Dew and then looks back down at her laptop computer to finish reading Mark’s account of how Jesus miraculously calmed a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee.

People all over the world love reading the Bible — and they have loved it for thousands of years. Why? People read the Bible because it is a fascinating book, filled with gripping stories and challenging exhortations. People read it because it is an important book, dealing with the big issues of life — God, eternal life, death, love, sin, and morals. People read it because they believe that in the Bible God speaks to them through written words. The Bible encourages us, lifts our spirits, comforts us, guides us, chides us, builds us up, gives us hope, and brings us close to the living God.

Some parts of the Bible are easy to understand, but much of it is not. Most Christians, however, desire to understand all of God’s Word, not just the easy portions. Many of us want to be able to dig deeper into that Word. We want to see more and to understand more of the biblical text. We also want to know that we understand the Bible correctly. That is, we want to be confident that we can pull the actual truth out of a text and not just develop an arbitrary, fanciful, or incorrect interpretation. Our book is designed for such people.

The process of interpreting and grasping the Bible is similar to embarking on a journey. Reading the text thoroughly and carefully lies at the beginning of the
journey. From this careful reading we become able to determine what the passage meant in the biblical context—that is, what it meant to the biblical audience.

Often, however, when we try to apply this meaning directly to ourselves, we run into problems. We are separated from the biblical audience by culture and customs, language, situation, and a vast expanse of time. These differences form a barrier—a river that separates us from the text and that often prohibits us from grasping the meaning of the text for ourselves.

If that were not enough, the Old Testament widens the river by adding another major interpretive barrier that separates us from the audience. Between the Old Testament biblical audience and Christian readers today lies a change in covenant. We as New Testament believers are under the new covenant, and we approach God through the sacrifice of Christ. The Old Testament people, however, were under the old covenant, and for them the law was central. In other words, the theological situation for the two groups is different. There is a covenant barrier between the Old Testament audience and us because we are under different covenants.

Thus, the river between the Old Testament text and us consists not only of culture, language, situation, and time, but also of covenant. We have much more in common with the New Testament audience; yet even in the New Testament, the different culture, language, and specific situations can present a formidable barrier to our desire to grasp the meaning of the text. The river is often too deep and too wide simply to wade across.

As a result, today’s Christian is often uncertain about how to interpret much of the Bible. How should we understand Leviticus 19:19, which prohibits wearing a garment made of two types of material? Does this mean that obedient Christians should wear only 100 percent cotton clothes? In Judges 6:37 Gideon puts out a fleece in order to confirm what God has told him. Does this mean that we should put out fleeces when we seek God’s leading?

Passages in the New Testament are not always much clearer. For example, Peter walks on the water in Matthew 14:29. Does this mean that we should attempt to walk on water in our obedience to Christ? If not, what does it mean and how can we apply it to our lives today? Even if we cannot walk on water, how do we cross the river that separates us from the text?

Any attempt to interpret and to apply the Bible involves trying to cross the river. While often unconscious of their interpretive method, many Christians today nonetheless frequently employ an intuitive or feels-right approach to interpretation. If the text looks as if it could be applied directly, then they attempt to apply it directly. If not, then they take a spiritualizing approach to the meaning—an approach that borders on allegorizing the biblical text (which shows little or no sensitivity to the biblical context). Or else they simply shrug their shoulders and move on to another passage, ignoring the meaning of the text altogether.

Such approaches will never land us safely on the other side of the river. Those using the intuitive approach blindly wade out into the river, hoping that the water is not more than knee deep. Sometimes they are fortunate and stumble onto a
sandbar, but often they step out into deep water, and they end up washed ashore somewhere downstream. Those who spiritualize, by contrast, try to jump the river in one grand leap, but they also end up washed ashore downstream with their intuitive buddies. Shrugging or ignoring a passage is to remain on the far side of the river and simply to gaze across without even attempting to cross.

Many Christians are admittedly uncomfortable with such approaches, recognizing the somewhat willy-nilly methodology and the extreme subjectivity involved, but they continue to use it because it is the only method they know. How do we move from the world of the biblical audience to the world of today?

This book addresses how to cross over that river into the world of today. We need a valid, legitimate approach to the Bible, one that is not based strictly on intuition and feeling. We need an approach that derives meaning from within the text, but one that also crosses over to the situation for today’s Christian.

We also need a consistent approach, one that can be used on any passage. Such an approach should eliminate the habit of skipping over texts and surfing along through the Bible looking for passages that might apply. A consistent approach should allow us to dig into any passage with a method to determine the meaning of that text for us today. We need an approach that does not leave us stranded on the banks of the interpretive river and one that does not dump us into the river to be washed ashore downstream. We need a way to study the Bible to cross over the river with validity and accuracy. Our goal in this book is to take you on the journey across the river, to transport you from the text and the world of the biblical audience to a valid understanding and application of the text for Christians today.

Basics of the Journey

Keep in mind that our goal is to grasp the meaning of the text God has intended. We do not create meaning out of a text; rather, we seek to find the meaning that is already there. However, we recognize that we cannot apply the meaning for the ancient audience directly to us today because of the river that separates us (culture, time, situation, covenant, etc.). Following the steps of the Interpretive Journey provides us with a procedure that allows us to take the meaning for the ancient audience and to cross over the river to determine a legitimate meaning for us today.

This journey works on the premise that the Bible is a record of God’s communication of himself and his will to us. We revere the Bible and treat it as holy because it is the Word of God and because God reveals himself to us through this Word. Many texts in the Bible are specific, concrete, revelatory expressions of broader, universal realities or theological principles. While the specifics of a particular passage may only apply to the particular situation of the biblical audience, the

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1. The terminology and concept that the text reflects a “concrete expression of a universal principle” is from John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 92.
theological principles revealed in that text are applicable to all of God’s people at all times. The theological principle, therefore, has meaning and application both to the ancient biblical audience and to Christians today.

Because the theological principle has meaning and application to both audiences, it functions as a bridge spanning the river of differences. Rather than blindly wading out into the river, foolishly attempting to jump across the river in one short hop, or wishfully gazing at the other shore without ever crossing, we can safely cross over the river on the bridge that the theological principle provides. Constructing this principlizing bridge will be one of the critical steps in our Interpretive Journey.

Thus, our journey starts with a careful reading of the text. Our final destination is to grasp the meaning of the text so that it changes our lives. It is an exciting trip, but one that requires hard work. There are no easy shortcuts.

The basic Interpretive Journey involves five steps:

**Step 1: Grasping the Text in Their Town**

**Question:** What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

The first part of Step 1 is to read the text carefully and observe it. In Step 1, try to see as much as possible in the text. Look, look, and look again, observing all that you can. Scrutinize the grammar and analyze all significant words. Likewise, study the historical and literary contexts. How does your passage relate to those that precede it and those that follow it?

After completing all of this study, synthesize the meaning of the passage for the biblical audience into one or two sentences. That is, write out what the passage meant for the biblical audience. Use past-tense verbs and refer to the biblical audience. For example:

God commanded the Israelites in Joshua 1 to . . .

Paul exhorted the Ephesians to . . .

Jesus encouraged his disciples by . . .

Be specific. Do not generalize or try to develop theological principles yet.

**Step 2: Measuring the Width of the River to Cross**

**Question:** What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

As mentioned above, the Christian today is separated from the biblical audience by differences in culture, language, situation, time, and often covenant. These differences form a river that hinders us from moving straight from meaning in their context to meaning in ours. The width of the river,
however, varies from passage to passage. Sometimes it is extremely wide, requiring a long, substantial bridge for crossing. Other times, however, it is a narrow creek that we can easily hop over. It is obviously important to know just how wide the river is before we start trying to construct a principlizing bridge across it.

In Step 2 you will take a good hard look at the river and determine just how wide it is for the passage you are studying. In this step you look for significant differences between our situation today and the situation of the biblical audience. If you are studying an Old Testament passage, also be sure to identify those significant theological differences that came as a result of the life and work of Jesus Christ.

In addition, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, try to identify any unique aspects of the situation of your passage. For example, in Joshua 1:1–9, the people of Israel are preparing to enter the Promised Land. Moses has just died and Joshua has been appointed to take his place. In this passage God speaks to Joshua to encourage him to be strong and faithful in the upcoming conquest of the land. What are the differences? We are not entering or conquering the Promised Land. We are not the new leaders of the nation of Israel. We are not under the old covenant.

Step 3: Crossing the Principlizing Bridge

Question: What is the theological principle in this text?

This is perhaps the most challenging step. In it you are looking for the
theological principle or principles that are reflected in the meaning of the text you identified in Step 1. Remember that this theological principle is part of the meaning. Your task is not to create the meaning but to discover the meaning intended by the author. As God gives specific expressions to specific biblical audiences, he is also giving universal theological teachings for all of his people through these same texts.

To determine the theological principle, first recall the differences you identified in Step 2. Next, try to identify any similarities between the situation of the biblical audience and our situation. For example, consider Joshua 1:1–9 again. Recall, of course, the differences that we identified in Step 2. But then note the similarities between the biblical situation and our own. We are also the people of God, in covenant relationship (new covenant); while we are not the leaders of Israel, nonetheless many of us are in leadership positions in the church; we are not invading the Promised Land, but we are seeking to obey the will of God and to accomplish what he has commanded us to do.

After reviewing the differences and identifying the similarities, return to the meaning for the biblical audience that you described in Step 1 and try to identify a broader theological principle reflected in the text, but also one that relates to the similarities between us and the biblical audience. In essence, the theological principle is the same as the “theological message” or the “main theological point” of the passage. (We will discuss in more detail how to develop theological principles in chapter 10.) We will use this theological principle as the principlizing bridge by which we can cross over the river of barriers.
We can summarize the criteria for formulating the theological principle with the following:

- The principle should be reflected in the text.
- The principle should be timeless and not tied to a specific situation.
- The principle should not be culturally bound.
- The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of Scripture.
- The principle should be relevant to both the biblical and the contemporary audience.

Write out the theological principle (or principles) in one or two sentences. Use present-tense verbs.

**Step 4: Consult the Biblical Map**

**Question:** How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?

During this step you must enter the parts-whole spiral. That is, you reflect back and forth between the text and the teachings of the rest of Scripture. Is your principle consistent with the rest of Scripture? Do other portions of Scripture add insight or qualification to the principle? If your principle is valid, it ought to “fit” or “correlate” with the rest of the Bible.

If you are studying an Old Testament passage, consulting the biblical map (Step 4) is especially important, for here you will run your theological principle through the grid of the New Testament, looking for what the New Testament adds to that principle or how the New Testament modifies it. Keep in mind that we read and
interpret the Old Testament as Christians. That is, although we believe that the
Old Testament is part of God’s inspired Word to us, we do not want to ignore
the cross and thus interpret and apply this literature as if we were Old Testament
Hebrews. We affirm that we are New Testament Christians, and we will interpret
the Old Testament from that vantage point.

Thus at the end of this step, sometimes you will need to reword your theologi-
cal principle slightly to ensure that it fits with the rest of Scripture. Don’t ignore
the elements you initially drew on in Step 3, but now fine-tune your principle if
it needs it.

Step 5: Grasping the Text in Our Town

Question: How should individual Christians today live out the theological
principles?

In Step 5 we apply the theological principle to the specific situation of indi-
vidual Christians in the church today. We cannot leave the meaning of the text
stranded in an abstract theological principle. We must now grapple with how we
should respond to that principle in our town. How does it apply in real-life situa-
tions today?

While for each passage there will usually be only a few (and often only one)
theological principles relevant for all Christians today, there will be numerous appli-
cational possibilities. This is because Christians today find themselves in many
different specific situations. Each of us will grasp and apply the same theological
principle in slightly different ways, depending on our current life situation and where
we are in our relationship with God. In our illustration, we have tried to show the
different applications possible by showing different individuals traveling on different
streets. (The application step will be discussed in much more detail in chapter 13.)
So, the Interpretive Journey as a whole looks like this:

**Step 1:** Grasp the text in their town. What did the text mean to the original audience?

**Step 2:** Measure the width of the river to cross. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

**Step 3:** Cross the principilizing bridge. What is the theological principle in this text?

**Step 4:** Consult the biblical map. How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?

**Step 5:** Grasp the text in our town. How should individual Christians today live out the theological principles?

### An Example — Joshua 1:1 – 9

We have mentioned Joshua 1:1 – 9 several times already. Let’s make the formal trip from this Old Testament passage to life today to illustrate how the Interpretive Journey works.

The passage is as follows:

1After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: 2“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. 3I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. 4Your territory will extend from the desert and to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea on the west. 5No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. 6Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

7Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. 9Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

**Step 1: What did the text mean to the biblical audience?**

The Lord commanded Joshua, the new leader of Israel, to draw strength and courage from God’s empowering presence, to be obedient to the law of Moses, and to meditate on the law so that he would be successful in the conquest of the Promised Land.

**Step 2: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?**

We are not leaders of the nation Israel (although some of us may be leaders in the church). We are not embarking on the conquest of Canaan, the Promised Land. We are not under the old covenant of law.
Step 3: What is the theological principle in this text?
To be effective in serving God and successful in the task to which he has called us, we must draw strength and courage from his presence. We must also be obedient to God’s Word, meditating on it constantly.

Step 4: How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?
The rest of the Bible consistently affirms that God’s people can draw strength and courage from his presence. In the New Testament believers experience God’s presence through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit rather than through his presence in the tabernacle. Likewise, throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament God’s people are exhorted to pay close, obedient attention to his Word.

Step 5: How should individual Christians today live out the theological principles?
There are numerous possible applications. Here are a few suggested ones:

- Spend more time meditating on God’s Word by listening to Christian music as you ride in your car.
- If God calls you to a new, scary ministry, such as teaching fourth-grade Sunday school, then be strengthened and encouraged by his empowering presence. Be obedient, keeping a focus on the Scriptures.
- If you are in a church leadership position, realize that successful Christian leadership requires strength and courage that flows from the presence of God.

The Journey and Grasping God’s Word
The Interpretive Journey is actually a blueprint for this book. In part 1 first we have looked at an overview of Bible translation and how we got the English Bible (chapter 1). In the next three chapters, we will focus on how to observe and read the biblical text carefully. We start with smaller, simpler units of text (chapter 3) and then move on to more complex and longer units of text (chapters 4 and 5).

In part 2 we spend time discussing contexts, both theirs (the ancient audience) and ours (the modern readers). We first explore historical and cultural contexts (chapter 6). Next we probe into the issue of preunderstanding (i.e., our context) in chapter 7. Then in chapter 8 we examine literary context. We wrap up this unit by learning how to do word studies within these contexts (chapter 9). All of these chapters in part 1 and part 2 give us skills necessary to get our feet firmly planted into Step 1.

Part 3 focuses on the theory needed to identify and construct the principilizing bridge, to cross over the river of differences, and to grasp the meaning of the text in a way that changes our lives in the world today. Chapter 10 deals with what meaning is and who controls it (author or reader?). Chapter 11 delves into some issues related to the theological principle and the concept of meaning. Are there deeper levels of meaning? Is there one meaning or numerous meanings for a passage? Chapter 12 then explores the role of the Holy Spirit in this whole interpretive process. Step 5 (application) is the focus of chapter 13, helping us to move on from head knowledge to actual life-changing behavior. In other words, while in chapter
2 we have introduced the Journey to you, the rest of part 1 as well as part 2 and part 3 expand on the Interpretive Journey, describing in more detail the interpretive issues you will face along the way.

In part 4 we focus on how to take the Interpretive Journey within the New Testament. In this unit we leave the theoretical discussions of part 3 and move into the actual practice of interpreting and applying the New Testament. We teach you how to take the Journey with passages from different types or genres of New Testament literature. Chapters 14–17 cover, respectively, New Testament Letters, the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation. These chapters pull together everything you learned in parts 1–3, teaching you how to apply your new skills to the New Testament.

Finally, part 5 addresses some of the specific challenges and opportunities of interpreting and applying the Old Testament. First, in the introduction, we refine the steps of the journey to fit the Old Testament situation more closely. Then, as in part 4, we teach you how to take the Interpretive Journey with passages from the different types of Old Testament genres. Chapters 18–22 sharpen your tools for grasping passages from the entire range of Old Testament literature: narrative, law, poetry, prophetic literature, and wisdom literature.

Are you ready to move forward into the exciting realm of interpretation and application? There are lots of interesting biblical passages ahead of you. Work hard! The rewards are great.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 2-1
Describe the five steps of the Interpretive Journey.

Assignment 2-2
What are the guidelines for developing theological principles?

Assignment 2-3
What are the differences that determine the width of the river to cross?