



PROJECT TIMOTHY

EXEGESIS & HERMENEUTICS

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE YOU READ

One can either **read to know** or **read to understand**. Knowledge does not always result in understanding but merely acquisition of information. Understanding comes with reasoned reflection about what is known. In the Christian context, we have another resource – the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us that the Spirit will help us to understand what is being taught to us. This means that a Christian understanding demands more than mere knowledge, but also the labor of reasoning with our minds and finally, drawing from the wisdom of God found in the Church and the World. Your role is not to be a Bible Answer Man, but to teach exegesis & hermeneutics.

Philip the Apostle asked the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading the prophet Isaiah a single question, “Do you understand what you are reading?” to which the court official answered, “How can I, unless someone guides me.” This response was the height of spiritual wisdom and intellectual humility. The eunuch realized that mere acquisition of knowledge does not entail understanding. Philip, who was tutored by Jesus, asked the eunuch, NOT whether he knew, but whether he understood what he knew. Acts 8:30

CONTENTS

1. Introduction & Why Interpret the Bible?
2. Finding Good Translations of the Bible
3. Old Testament Narratives
4. The Laws
5. The Psalms
6. Wisdom Literature
7. Prophetic Literature
8. An Exercise in E & H: Jeremiah
9. The Gospels & Parables
10. Acts
11. Epistles
12. Revelation: Apocalyptic-Eschatological Literature

INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament was written and collected over a long period of time. Most of the books have been redacted (edited) with additions or portions excised. The different primary and secondary writers contribute to a rich tapestry of testimonial witnesses who capture different insights into the nature of the revealed God (not God revealed).

Let us begin with several important points:

- 1) **The Bible is a collection of materials each with more than one identifiable genre** (type of literature). Acknowledging this will help you to **read intelligently** and with a reasonable expectation of what to look for. We do this automatically when we read any contemporary writing. When I pick up *The New York Times*, I know what to expect of the business pages or international news sections. On the other hand, a sales flyer sent to my mailbox about ‘the best toothbrush recommended by dentists’ has a different purpose and I read it accordingly. In the same manner, when I open my email inbox, I scan the name of the sender to determine the type and level of acuity I will prepare my reasoning mind to engage in. In each case, I have some background information about what I am about to read. That is why it is jarring when you read an unsolicited email with deceptive subject headings such as “Urgent: What You Requested”, only to discover another sales pitch for *Viagra* or some such thieves of your time. Such grounding of information is necessary for intelligent reading. There are at least ten different types of literary genres in the Bible.
- 2) **The goal of reading to understand the Bible is to obey God’s Word.** This however does not mean to merely mimic actions we read about but to understand what each text is trying to teach us to obey. It may be obedience by affirming the actions described or the complete opposite, obedience by avoiding the actions described. It may be obedience by changing the way we think and believe about God, people and things.
- 3) **A responsible reading of the Bible seeks to understand what the text meant when it was written and what it means to us now.** Most scholars are interested in what the text meant when it was written while most laypersons are interested in what it means for them today. Both the ‘there and then’ as well as the ‘here and now’ are crucial for the believing scholar like me and the scholarly believer like, perhaps you. Even lay readers ought to appreciate the scholarly effort of writing, editing, copying, translating and interpreting the materials that have been handed down to us.
- 4) **The biblical texts mean what they meant before they can mean what they mean.** This means that we must always ask after its historical meaning (exegesis) before we can tease out the same meaning in different contexts, like ours today (hermeneutics). The Bible student then has the double task of exegesis and hermeneutics. We are embedded into the contexts we find ourselves. So knowing our own biases is crucial to the task of understanding by interpretation. As an exegete, she must infer from the background information about the origin of the text to determine the historical message of the writer.

As a hermeneute, she has to rethink the text and apply it faithfully to our own context today, mindful of the original intention. Since the ancient writers did not enjoy the advantage of historical and scientific knowledge, we have to read behind the plain texts to figure out not what they said, but also what they meant to say, with the knowledge they had then. For example, when we say the sun rises tomorrow, we know that the earth merely goes round the sun and we perceive the appearance of a rising sun but when the biblical writers speak as such, they do not mean to contradict modern astronomical knowledge but mean to refer to a new day.

- 5) **Exegesis begins with asking the right questions** rather than necessarily having immense knowledge. Each genre requires us to ask different questions.

1. WHY INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

We so often hear well-meaning Christians say, “You don’t need to interpret the bible. Just read it and obey.” This protest often masks a frustration with professional teachers who seem to muddy the waters, making the Bible more obscure than it needs to be. There is some truth in this. Indeed, Christians ought to read, believe, and obey the Bible.¹ This is often the result of a misguided view that interpretation seeks unique or novel explanations. This is patently untrue. A false understanding persists among Christians, suggesting that unique interpretations demonstrate high spirituality. This exhibition of spiritual pride must be resisted. While the Church should welcome profound insights which may result from much hard labor by those who are called to study and teach, the student of the Bible is not tasked with digging up new discoveries but with faithful understanding.

The aim of interpretation is to get at the ‘plain meaning of the text’ with enlightened common sense. The meaning should make sense of the text. Here we note the importance of human reason for the task. However, both the nature of the individual reader and the nature of the Bible make it necessary to interpret the Bible responsibly.

Every time we read anything, we interpret what we read based on what we think we understand of the words in the text. Further, not all plain meanings are equally plain to everyone. Here are some examples of how plain readings of the Bible results in different interpretations: In 1 Cor. 14:34-35, how should women keep silent in church? Should women pray with their heads covered? Does the Bible support infant baptism? Can one lose one’s (eternal?) salvation? Do we choose or does God choose us into election? A fine contemporary example is the misuse of the Bible in the Prayer of Jabez movement. In the recent past, the wealth and health gospel dominated Christian headlines, strongly suggesting that God’s will for all of us is financial and material prosperity based on 3 John 2, except that the historical meaning of prosperity there has nothing to do with financial security. Fee and Stuart correctly argue that the antidote to *bad interpretation* is not *no interpretation* (which is a fallacy anyway since it is merely unwitting interpretation) but *good interpretation*.²

The unique feature of the Bible as the Word of God given through human words in history³ is the second reason that demands careful interpretation. It is at once both a human and a divine source. **As God’s Word, it enjoys eternal relevance and as the product of human labors, it is conditioned by the particularities of language, time, culture, economic and political circumstances of its origin, both oral and documentary.** Those who believe that the Bible is merely a human book limits their scholarship to a historical inquiry, a legitimate exercise but inadequate to the task of a Christian biblical interpreter. On the other hand, those who believe the Bible only with reference to its eternal relevance think of it as a collection of propositions to be believed and imperatives to be obeyed. They will end up picking and choosing what to believe and obey. Those who insist that Deuteronomy 22:5 requires that “A woman must not wear men’s

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Third Edition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 17.

² Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 21.

³ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 21.

clothing” as an eternal teaching often ignores verse 8 (building a parapet around one’s house), or verse 12 (making tassels on the four corners of one’s cloak).

God chose instead to speak his eternal truths to us within the particular circumstances and events of human history⁴ so that we may understand what we are being taught. God chose almost every conceivable kind of communication available: **narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws, poetries, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons, apocalypses**, etc. God also spoke in the vocabulary of contemporary cultures so that he could be understood. Our job is to hear the words and seek understanding of them. Let us now learn about the arts and sciences of exegesis and hermeneutics.

1.1 Exegesis

This is the task of discovering the original, intended meaning of the writer with a careful, systematic study of the Bible. It is an investigative, historical task and always the first step in every reading of the Bible, not only when an obvious cultural clash arises, otherwise it becomes selective exegesis.

Although the professional biblical scholar has to know several ancient languages to be a good exegete, there is much one can do even without knowledge of the relevant ancient languages.

First, learn to be patient and read the text carefully, preferably after carving up sufficient time not to feel rushed.

Then ask the questions of (i) historical context, (ii) literary context, and finally, (iii) content.

- 1) Historical context: The period and culture of the writer and his intended audience (not necessarily readers since most of the listeners are not literate), including the geographical, topographical, economic, and socio-political factors as well as the occasion and purpose for the writing. A Bible dictionary or encyclopedia can be an immense help. Historical atlases are essential to get a sense of the moving boundaries of nations and people groups. Names of cities change over time and a single name may be commonly used to designate many different cities.
- 2) Literary context: This is the crucial task in exegesis, determining what the text means with reference to two assumptions: words only have meaning in sentences, and sentences usually have clear meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences. The most important question to ask is “So what?” or “What is the point?” by tracing the writer’s train of thought.⁵
- 3) Content: This has to do with the meanings of words, the grammatical relationships in sentences, and the choice of the original text where the manuscripts (hand-written copies) differ from one another. Although consulting a good exegetical commentary is the last thing you want to do, it is also often a necessary assistance most of us need.

⁴ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 22.

⁵ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 27-28. The KJV and NASB arrange every verse as a separate paragraph, making it more difficult to work out the thought pattern of the writer.

Among the basic biblical tools you ought to arm yourself with are

- several good translations of the Protestant **Bible**.
- a **Bible dictionary**, and
- good **commentaries**.

1.2 Hermeneutics

This term is sometimes used to include exegesis but for our purpose, we shall use it in the narrow sense of seeking contemporary relevance for the ‘here and now’ of ancient texts. Although one can read the Bible devotionally and be inspired by the Holy Spirit, this is not the only way to read the Bible. Learning to study the Bible greatly informs our informal devotional readings.

Hermeneutics begins with good exegesis⁶, the meaning of the text ‘there and then’. Exegesis serves as the control so that our hermeneutical range does not go beyond its original ‘intentional footprint’. Otherwise we can easily make the text mean anything we wish it to mean to comport with our pet issues of the day.

Examples of poor exegesis failing to control extravagant hermeneutics include

- (i) Baptism of the dead based on 1 Corinthians 15:29
- (ii) Snake-handling based on Mark 16:18, and
- (iii) The prosperity gospel for the promise of the American Dream based on 3 John 2.

All these translations start with the concerns of the ‘here and now’ and then look back to the text of the ‘there and then’ to look for support.

The starting point in hermeneutics is that the text cannot mean what it never meant. The true meaning of the text is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken.

The Bible cannot be well understood without grounding in history, literature, and theology. However, although knowledge of ancient local history and literary conventions are very important but the purpose of the Old Testament is primarily theological. The theology in its Old Testament context is called biblical theology, which stands between exegesis (what the text originally meant) and systematic theology (an organized format of teachings in the Bible).⁷

⁶ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 29.

⁷ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, III. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 34-35.

The text of the Bible must be understood through the lens of an exegete who **breaks down the meaning of the text with grammar**, is guided by a biblical theology to understand language about God in human thought, before establishing a systematic theology to draw a contemporary understanding. Biblical theology asks: What is the perspective of the Bible? The exegete asks, “What did it mean then?” Finally, the hermeneute asks, “What does it mean for us today?”

This scripture is neither a history nor a chronology but a theological treatise. Much of the Old Testament writings are **prose** and narratives of historical events, which permit a faster read. But some are **poetic**. The characteristic of poetry lies in its highly stylized language. It is also an artificial language in that it does not follow the normal rules of communication.

Be careful NOT to read narratives as moral stories from which to model our lives with. Many **narratives** are simply to communicate to the original audience what happened and why (exegesis) while our goal to understand what it means to us (hermeneutics) has to take into account contextual changes since biblical times. One such context is **scientific knowledge**. Another is cultural or sociological change of which the most significant is the **pluralism of religions**. We do not mimic Jesus by walking in sandals to synagogue instead of taking the subway to church. We are also not compelled to use wine only at a communion service for members of alcoholics anonymous or to deny modern medical treatment for people who are ill. You can imagine the consequences of bad theology shaping poor hermeneutics, resulting in kooky religiosity. Most modern heresies involve bad hermeneutics.

2. FINDING GOOD TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

The Protestant Bible consists of sixty-six books, which were originally written, in three languages, **Aramaic** (half of Daniel and two passages of Ezra), **Hebrew** (the rest of the Old Testament), and **Greek** (New Testament). Since few of us have access to these languages, it is important to read from the best available English translations. The inescapable fact is that the moment you read the Bible in any translation, you are involved with interpretation whether you like it or not. This means that the reader (you) are inevitably at the mercy of the translators as they choose English words to express what they believe the original languages really intended to say.⁸

This means that using a single translation makes you committed to the exegetical choices of the translation. To check this limitation, I recommend that while you use one translation (say, TNIV) to read and memorize, use up to two other translations for Bible study (say, NASB or NRSV and NLT). This is because while a certain word may have, say, three translations, only one ought to be the correct interpretation, the meaning that the writer intended. The three translations of the Bible you select ought to represent a range of biases, from literal to free translations. When difficulty arises, use commentaries to resolve the tensions.

Example: In 1 Cor. 7:36, Paul teaches that if a man is behaving badly with a woman and desires sex with her, he ought to marry her. But who is she that Paul was referring to? The very literal NKJV translates her as “his virgin”, the very free NEB translates her as “a partner in celibacy”, while the TNIV translates her as “the virgin he is engaged to”. While all three are legitimate translations permitted by the Greek word, *parthenon*⁹ (virgin), the TNIV offers the only correct interpretation within the context. The possible but wrong interpretations permitted by alternative translations include Paul teaching a father to not withhold marriage from her virgin daughter, or a man agreed to a celibate marriage but now burns with passion, or a man betrothed to a virgin at a young age and now wants to consummate the relationship.

The ongoing task of making new translations for each generation is crucial to preserve the intended meanings. For instance, when the NRSV was prepared, the late Dr. Bruce Metzger (a friend of ACT) who led the translation committee, said that the line from Matthew 4:4, “Man does not live by bread alone,” became “One does not live by bread alone” to include women. They kept alert for words that by the late 20th century had taken on other meanings. “I will accept no bull from your house,” from Psalms 50:9, became “I will not accept a bull from your house.” In the new version, a part of 2 Corinthians 11:25 became “Once I received a stoning.” The previous version read, “Once I was stoned.”

⁸ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 34.

⁹ Kurt and Barbara Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983), 452.

2.1 The art and science of translation

Translation is a science, an artful science. Translators make two choices, textual (the actual word) and linguistic (a theory of language translation).

2.1.1: Text

The first problem to note is that no autograph (handwritten original) of any biblical book has been discovered. The thousands of ancient manuscripts (handwritten copies) which exist differ from each other, some of them significantly so, especially the New Testament manuscripts (mss). The places in the text where the mss differs from each other are called variants. The near impossible task of determining which represent the original and which represent human errors relies on textual criticism¹⁰, the science that attempts to discover the original texts of ancient documents.

1) Textual criticism is a science that works with careful controls

In making choices about the authenticity of texts, scholars consider the external (character and quality of the mss such as its age and circumstances of discovery) as well as internal (mistakes which copyists are likely to make) evidence, weighing the combination of the two.

External evidence for the Old Testament amounts to the choice among copies of the pre-Christian Greek Septuagint (LXX), the medieval Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), or the Qumran or Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). For New Testament, the best external evidence comes from Egyptian sources, where a strong tradition of reliable copying thrived.

Internal evidence depends on the work of the copyists and writers. Years of scholarly analyses of scribal habits and tendencies have made it easier to detect mistakes in copying. A biblical writer's style and vocabulary offers clues to authentic copies. The assumption made is that the variant that best explains how all the other variants came about is most likely to be the closest to the original.

Example: In 1 Samuel 8:16, the NKJV, which is based on poor, late mss., reads "he will take ... your young men and your donkeys" while the newer, more reliably sourced TNIV reads, "he will take ... the best of your cattle and donkeys". The word cattle is found in the LXX, written earlier than the miscopy of the MT, preserves the original word. This error is quite understandable when you consider that in Hebrew, "your young men" is *bhrykm* and "your cattle" is *bqrykm*.¹¹ The error of a single letter transformed the meaning.¹²

An example of deliberate change by adding some words may be noted in 1 Cor. 6:20. The NKJV reads "Therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's"

¹⁰ For an excellent account of textual criticism, read the articles by Bruce Waltke and Gordon Fee in volume 1 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 211-222 and 419-433.

¹¹ K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977), 456.

¹² Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 37.

while the TNIV reads “Therefore honor God with your bodies”. Greek philosophy, with its low view of the body, had influenced Christianity by the time this copying was done. The monks concluded that if Paul was concerned about the body, he must surely have also been interested in the spirit, and added “and in your spirit”.¹³ However, this misses Paul’s point, which was to discuss the body! The TNIV restores the original text.

2) Textual criticism is an art that deals with many human variables

Sometimes even the experts cannot agree on which is which. Where a committee does the translation, the majority view is used and the minority position is placed in the margin. Such uncertainty can happen when evidence from the best mss. conflicts with the best explanation for the error or when more than one variant can explain it equally well. The decision made in one translation may be reversed when a revised translation is commissioned.

Example: The text of 1 Cor. 13:3 in the NIV, published in 1984, reads “surrender my body to the flames”, with “surrender my body that I may boast” in the margin.

However, in 2002, the TNIV reads, “give over my body to hardship that I may boast”, with “give over my body to the flames” in the margin.

In Greek, the difference between boast (*kauchesomai*) and flame (*kauthesomai*) is a single letter.¹⁴

The word ‘boast’ was the best Greek translation but ‘flames’ took its place in later Latin translations, at a time when Christians were being burned at the stake. While all this can be disconcerting, we should be mindful that either meaning does not violate the point that Paul was trying to make – personal physical sacrifice without love comes to nothing.

What about the King James Version (KJV)?

The KJV was for a long time, the most widely read English translation of the Bible in the world, written with great beauty and powerful expression. Unfortunately, when it was published in 1611, the only Greek New Testament sources available to the translators were late mss. of poor quality, ridden with errors after over a thousand years of hand copying. Few of these mistakes make any difference doctrinally but they make a difference in the meaning of specific texts. In 1952, the KJV was revised and the RSV was the result. In 1982, dissatisfaction with the RSV led to another revision and this time, it was a direct update of the KJV, bypassing the RSV.

This became the NKJV. Unfortunately, this version eliminated the best feature of the KJV, the beautiful expressions, and kept the worst feature (the flawed text).¹⁵

Note: Revisions of the RSV were made in 1991 (NRSV) and 2001 (ESV).

¹³ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 38.

¹⁴ Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 463.

¹⁵ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 40.

2.1.2: Language

This is about the two kinds of choices, verbal and grammatical, that translators have to make. The trick is to faithfully transfer words and ideas from one language to another.

The original languages of Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek serve as the primary sources for English, the receptor language. The translator has to account for the historical distance, i.e., the differences that exist between the original language and the receptor language of the text, in terms of words, grammar, idioms, slang and abbreviated thoughts as well as in matters of culture and history. The classification of translations into formal equivalence, functional equivalence and free translation.¹⁶ was recently changed. Under the new classification, the free translations have been merged with functional equivalence and some former dynamic equivalent translations are now classified as mediating versions.¹⁷

a) **Formal equivalence** (literal or word-for-word) attempts to keep as close as possible to the form of the original language in terms of both words and grammar. This is the literal approach and keeps the historical distance at its maximum. E.g. [NRSV \(1990\)](#), [NASB \(1995\)](#), [ESV \(2001\)](#), [NKJV \(1982\)](#).

b) **Functional equivalence** (dynamic equivalence or idiomatic) attempts to put the words and idioms of the original language into a normal way of saying the same thing in English. This method seeks to reproduce the meaning of the text in idiomatic English, regardless of the form. The historical distance is also kept but language, grammar and style are updated. This is sometimes called a paraphrase and tries to eliminate as much of the historical distance as possible while remaining faithful to the original text. E.g. [NLT \(2004\)](#), [The Message \(2002\)](#), [CEV \(1995\)](#), [GNT \(1992\)](#), [Living Bible \(1971\)](#).

c) **Mediating Versions** (general purpose) seek to balance the needs of formal and functional equivalences. E.g. [TNIV \(2005\)](#), [NAB \(1991\)](#), [Tanakh \(1985\)](#), [NIV \(1984\)](#), [NEB \(1970\)](#).

The theory of translation then is all about where the primary emphasis lays within the formal-functional-free continuum. This becomes especially acute in the work of foreign missions. How can people living in the tropics understand the phrase “white as snow” or conservative cultures receive the words “greet each other with a holy kiss?”

When there is a sacrifice to be made between fidelity to the original or receptor language, the translator should favor the receptor language, since the reason for translation in the first place is intelligibility. Hence, the best guide to choosing a translation is to seek functional or dynamic equivalence as your anchor translation, and use a formal equivalence Bible as well as a free translation as your supplementary (not secondary) sources.

Pros and Cons: Formal equivalence will give you confidence that you are close to the original words while free translations (*Philips Bible*, *Living Bible*, and *The Message*) are helpful to stimulate your thinking about the possible meaning of a text. However, the literal rendering of formal translations can be ambiguous and free translations can come very close to being a commentary by one person.

¹⁶ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 41. This tripartite classification in

¹⁷ Fee, Gordon and Mark Strauss, *How To Choose Translation For All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007)

2.2 Problems in translation

1) Weights, measures, and money

Inflation can make a mockery of specific units of money and political decisions to standardize or not standardize weights and measures can paralyze the translator's hopes for universal comprehension. Sometimes, words change in meaning over time, such as *talenton*, the Greek monetary unit of a very large amount translated as talent, while the *denarius* is a Roman monetary unit of a modest amount. In the parable of Matthew 18:23-34¹⁸, they are used as deliberate hyperbolic contrasts. The TNIV translates them as bags of gold and silver coins and explains the words in a footnote.

2) Euphemisms

All languages play with euphemisms: polite or vague words or phrases used to replace words or phrases thought to be too rude to use in open company. The translator may translate literally and lose most of the English readers, use formal equivalence and possibly offend the reader, or replace it with a functionally equivalent euphemism. The best choice is the third, and if not possible, the second. The goal of translation is after all, comprehension. Hence, in Genesis 31:35, "I am having my monthly period" is preferable to "the manner of women is upon me" and in 2 Samuel 13:14, "he raped her" is preferable to "[he] forced her, and lay with her".¹⁹

3) Vocabulary

The challenge here is matching appropriate words in the receptor language that is not already contaminated with connotations foreign to the original language. To compound the problem, many words have various shades of meaning not easily matched with words from the receptor language. So when Paul writes of *sarx* (flesh), almost any other English word is preferable to the translation "flesh". Paul usually refers to "sinful nature" when contrasting between flesh and spirit or "human nature" when it refers to Jesus' Davidic descent,²⁰ rather than meat.

4) Wordplays

Wordplays abound in all languages and are almost impossible to adequately translate. Poets typically use words that sound the same but have different meanings to compose clever and memorable phrases. In Amos 8:1-2, two words, *qys* and *qs* sound the same in Hebrew²¹, but can be translated as summer and end as it was in the NRSV, as "summer fruit" anticipating "The end has come ...". This has been updated by the TNIV to mean "ripe fruit" announcing that "The time is ripe ..."²², for a better rendering.

5) Grammar and Syntax

The Greek language is fond of genitive constructions. Genitives refer to possession, as in "my book". This is a true possessive – I really own the book. It may therefore be rendered accurately "book of me" and still mean that I own the book.

¹⁸ Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 51.

¹⁹ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 45.

²⁰ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 46.

²¹ Elliger and Rudolph, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 1025.

²² Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 47.

However, a nontrue possessive such as “God’s grace” does not mean that God owns the grace. Hence when we use the genitive “of” as in “the grace of God”, we do not mean that God possesses grace but rather that God is the source of grace. Such “of” phrases are used in Greek for nonpossessive constructions such as “coals of fire”, which when translated into an “of” phrase in English, does not mean that the coals belong to the fire, but that the coal is burning. So when you read an “of” phrase in the English translation, ask yourself whether this is a possessive or nonpossessive use of the genitive, “of”. Sometimes it refers to the relationship between owner and possessed and sometimes it does not.

Example: If you misunderstand the genitive function in Greek, and mistake a possessive genitive for a nonpossessive genitive, you might translate 1 Cor. 3:9 to mean, “We are laborers together with God” instead of “We are God’s co-workers”. This is important. The first rendering says we are partners with God while the second says we belong to God, expressing the most intimate relationship. Another example of grammarian use is in the word “and”. In genesis 1, every sentence starts with “And ...”, a total of 30 times, even when there is nothing which logically precedes it. Today, Hebrew grammarians recognize that the word “and” in Hebrew at the beginning of a sentence is sometimes used as the virtual equivalent of capitalization at the beginning of English sentences.²³ This means that not every Hebrew “and” translates into an English “and”.

6) Gender issues

In the early 1980s, the problem of using masculine language where women are clearly included was becoming an issue for translators. In 1991, under the leadership of Bruce Metzger, the NRSV was published. This version was gender-inclusive in instances where the writer intended to include women in the original texts. All other major revisions followed suit. However, in 2001, the ESV was published, to “stem the tide” and is deliberately exclusive of women even in places where it was not necessary to do so. Statements like “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” clearly refers to both men and women and can easily be rendered, “Let one” instead of “Let him” but there are difficult passages that resist easy gender-inclusive translation.

Example: Psalm 1 contrasts the single righteous man with the many who are wicked. To replace man with “person” or the clumsy “man or woman” may take away from the poetry and cadence. Pluralizing everything with the word “those” sounds like a good solution but this can remove the writer’s intentional singular-plural contrast. In attempting to be functionally equivalent, it risks distorting the very intention of the writer²⁴ preserved in the singular form that happens to be masculine. This task calls for great patience and careful reading of the Bible as a whole. One can see how either approach can distort the original meaning on a plain reading. This is why the Bible has to be taught and learned in community rather than merely read in isolation.

²³ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 48-9.

²⁴ Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 51.