"Barrick takes us on an engaging tour of the social and linguistic challenges facing Bible translators, as they move between language systems to make the Bible accessible to common people in their heart language."

—George Athas, Moore Theological College

"With a vast array of fascinating historical realities and colorful word pictures, Barrick takes us into the complicated—yet essential—world of Bible translation, and puts us in the driver's seat to see how God is faithfully preserving and spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ through his written Word. Every church must have a copy."

—David Beakley, Academic Dean, Christ Seminary, Polokwane, South Africa

"This book is intriguing, challenging, and comforting. This book is designed not only for Bible translators, but for all perceptive believers who want to understand the challenges involved in bringing a translation to fruition. Bill Barrick so beneficially 'pulls back the veil' to allow his readers to see what translators struggle with and how decisions are made."

—Stephen J. Bramer, Chair and Professor of Bible Exposition,
Dallas Theological Seminary

"Bill Barrick has masterfully applied his expertise as a Hebrew scholar, coupled with his years of experience as a Bible translator, to make a compelling case for translating God's Word in the common language of the readers."

—Dave Brunn, International Translation Consultant, Ethnos 360

"This volume is an important contribution in clarifying the issues of Bible translation. It also inspires us to join in and/or support the lofty endeavor of making God known to every nation, tribe, and tongue."

—Abner Chou, John F. MacArthur Endowed Fellow, The Master's University

"With clarity of explanation and an engaging style, Bill Barrick walks the reader through the interpretive steps necessary to render the text of Scripture faithfully and clearly from original language to target language. Readers of this volume will come away with a better grasp of the diligence and care required to provide readable and accurate translations, and will likely catch Barrick's excitement for the task along the way. Unique contributions include a refined matrix and principles for assessing popular English Bible versions, first-person accounts of the feats and challenges of missionaries on the front lines of Bible translation, and a detailed sketch of the qualities and training needed to be an effective Bible translator."

—Kyle C. Dunham, Associate Professor of Old Testament,
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

"In reading *Understanding Bible Translation*, I felt like an apprentice sitting at the elbow of a master artisan, watching him perform his craft with excellence. Bill Barrick masterfully demonstrates what is involved in translating the Bible with both clarity and accuracy."

—Daniel J. Estes, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament, Cedarville University

"Whether you are a senior pastor tasked with weekly teaching or a student of Holy Scripture, this book is a must-read! This new work of Bill Barrick will broaden your understanding of biblical translation."

—Jason D. Falzarano, Dean of BABS, Calvary Chapel University

"Bill Barrick covers all the essentials in a long-awaited and accessible book on Bible translation that will suit both college and seminary-level readers, as well as lay-readers. Barrick's very high regard for the Bible, and adept handling of some very difficult subjects, is greatly complemented by his own personal experience on the field as a Bible translator."

—Stephen T. Hague, Professor of Biblical Studies, Faith Theological Seminary

"Bill Barrick writes for the seasoned Christian about the importance of Bible translation and points out challenges that such translators face. Included in this book is an evaluation of English Bibles and encouragement to churches regarding how to support Bible translators. Lastly, Barrick gives guidance to those interested in becoming Bible translators."

—Gregory Harris, Department Chair and Professor of Bible Exposition,
The Master's Seminary

"Using the personal experience of fifteen years in Bible translation and missionary work in Bangladesh, Bill Barrick writes winsomely—and in a compelling manner—about the value and importance of Bible translation. He explains both the joys of an accurate and readable translation and the tragedy (sometimes humor) of the inaccurate translation. Numerous instances of good, better, and best translations pepper Barrick's text, especially when he writes about the history of Bible translation."

—Joel D. Heck, Professor of Theology, Concordia University Texas

"*Understanding Bible Translation* is full of practical examples of how 'good translators take an interest in every aspect of life and culture,' as Bill Barrick makes the convincing case that 'the Bible's cultural, geographical, and historical details must be left intact.' The text emphasizes the need for accuracy and clarity in translation, and a strong case is made for relying on the original biblical languages in translation work."

—Bill Katip, President, Grace College and Seminary

"This is by far the most up-to-date and well-written book on the subject. I have always shared with my students the use of synchronic word studies when determining the author's word usage in its context. This takes it even further."

—Stephen R. Lewis, President and Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies, Rocky Mountain Seminary; and Adjunct Professor, Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary

"*Understanding Bible Translation* takes a highly technical endeavor and makes it obtainable for all. William Barrick has given the church an exceptional, firsthand, heartfelt book that will carry this great need and wonderful privilege into the next generations. This book is a thoroughly enjoyable and deeply rewarding read."

—Stephen M. Lonetti, Missionary and Pastor, Beacon of Hope Church;
Founder and Executive Director, LifeGate Worldwide;
and Bible Translator Emeritus, New Tribes

"Bill Barrick meticulously explains the complex task of Bible translation in an easily understandable manner for us non-translators. Using multiple biblical texts as illustrations of proper translation, Barrick compellingly urges his readership to appreciate anew the translation process/history for the Bible they read in their own language and to encourage their support for Bible translation projects."

—Richard Mayhue, Research Professor of Theology Emeritus, The Master's Seminary

"This volume is the overflow of Barrick's rich history of teaching Hebrew, and his experience as an exegetical consultant for the *Standard Bengali Common Language Bible* and the *Muslim Bengali Common Language Bible*, as well as a number of other local languages. One of the facets of this book that makes it such a captivating read is how the author beneficially integrates germane biblical texts and his firsthand experience as a Bible translator and consultant in Bangladesh into the fabric of this work."

—Robert V. McCabe, Retired Professor of Old Testament,
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

"In a day of the proliferation of new versions of the Bible and translations of the Scriptures, we need a useful tool to help us properly assess them. Having read it with much personal benefit, I heartily recommend this great work."

—Alex Montoya, Pastor of First Fundamental Bible Church, Whittier, California;
Professor of Pastoral Ministries, The Master's Seminary;
and President, Seminario Biblical Fundamental of Southern California

"Decades of personal experience in each of the relevant disciplines related to this subject (international missions, Bible translation, pastoral ministry, and seminary training) make Dr. Barrick uniquely qualified and his work a must-read for anyone in or preparing for any of these roles. His exegesis is thorough. His tips and insights for translators and exegetes are invaluable. Most importantly, his love for Christ and absolute commitment to the accurate and faithful handling of God's Word resonates consistently throughout."

—Bryan Murphy, Associate Professor, The Master's Seminary;
and Pastor/Teacher, Roosevelt Community Church

"If you want to learn how Bible translation works, wouldn't you want to learn from a faithful Christian scholar who has been teaching people to translate the Bible for more than fifty years, who spent fifteen years translating the Bible into Bengali, and who has helped translate English versions such as the ESV and NET Bible? Bill Barrick has so much wisdom to share."

—Andy Naselli, Associate Professor of New Testament and Theology,
Bethlehem College & Seminary

"For two decades I have told my students that William Barrick is the top biblical exegete I have known or read. In this volume, Dr. Barrick establishes a new standard for works on Bible translation. His mastery of biblical languages and extensive experience at Bible translation in a foreign field permeates every page of the book."

—Douglas Petrovich, Professor of Biblical History and Exegesis, The Bible Seminary

"*Understanding Bible Translation* has given me new insight in understanding the biblical text better to help me prepare a New Reader's edition of the Bible in Bangladesh. This book is a valuable resource for Bible translators and those in the arena of theological studies."

—Shamsul Alam Polash, Chairman, International Bible Church Trust

"*Understanding Bible Translation* reads at times like a biographical thriller, a humorous cultural guide, an exegetical manual, a pastor's personal diary, and a well-planned textbook where intriguing experiences provide the backdrop for addressing important issues. All who aspire to be faithful messengers will be fascinated and informed by this helpful book."

—Tim M. Sigler, Provost & Dean, Professor of Hebrew and Biblical Studies,
Shepherds Theological Seminary

"I have praised God many times for his grace in sending Dr. Barrick and his family to Bangladesh to meet the need of the ABWE Bangladesh Field Council. His knowledge of Hebrew and related biblical languages, and his faithfulness to accuracy in our translation of the text, were invaluable for accomplishing that project over the course of about sixteen years. His book, *Understanding Bible Translation,* gives excellent insight into all that is involved in translating the Bible into another language."

—Lynn Silvernale, International Translation Consultant,
Retired missionary to Bangladesh, ABWE

"A seasoned veteran of Bible translation in multiple languages, Bill Barrick privileges *accuracy* and *understandability* in transmitting the sacred text to the everyday reader. This book is a gem of serious value for both the church and the academy."

—Mark Snoeberger, Professor of Systematic Theology, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

“As someone involved in an international ministry involving interaction in several different languages, I understand the need for careful approaches to understanding communication across language barriers in both oral and printed forms. Many such works have come on the scene over the years, but this one will provide the best balance to Bible translation. Bill Barrick, an experienced Bible translator at one time in Bangladesh, avoids the extremes of language translation: hyperformalism on one side that at times approaches a wooden literalism, and an approach on the other side that takes too much liberty in translation. Barrick correctly opts for the transfer of meaning more than form in the translation process from the original biblical languages. The real strength of the book is the identification of clear translation principles at several points in the process and in the many concrete examples for the purpose of illustrating such principles”

—Mike Stallard, Director of International Ministries, Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry

“If I were facing major brain surgery, I would certainly want to know that my surgeon had plenty of experience and knew what he was doing. *Understanding Bible Translation,* is by analogy, the chance to learn from a skilled master craftsman”

—J. Paul Tanner, Middle East Director for Biblical Education by Extension

“This veteran missionary turned seminary professor has mastered the art of Bible translation. Whether you are a novice or an expert, a layman or a pastor, a sender or a goer, if you want to better understand what’s at stake in a good Bible translation this book is for you.”

—Adam Tyson, Pastor, Placerita Bible Church

“Has God really said what I just read? Why are the King James Version and the English Standard Version different? What version should I read? Dr. Barrick has provided a marvelous resource to help serious readers, Bible students, and aspiring scholars understand the important and complex nature of translating the Bible into everyday language. I highly recommend this book for Christians serious about their faith. It will increase your confidence in the Bible, and your trust in the God who is not silent.”

—Thomas White, President and Professor of Theology, Cedarville University

“This book is a must-read for any serious Christian, so that one will take God’s Word with more seriousness—with the same weightiness as the translators engage in when they endeavor to translate God’s Word in another language.”

—Jan Verbruggen, Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature,
Western Seminary

“Bill Barrick has provided a much-needed resource for future Bible translators, ministry students, and laity seeking a better understanding of Bible translations and the labor and challenges in ensuring the Word is faithfully preserved, and transmitted.”

—David W. Whitlock, President, Oklahoma Baptist University

“Bill Barrick draws upon a lifetime of scholarship to challenge what I thought I knew about Scripture, humble me with gratitude for those who translated my Bible, and inspire me to support the teams who continue this sometimes thrilling, sometimes tedious work. You will not look at your Bible the same way again.”

—Mike Wittmer, Professor of Systematic Theology, Grand Rapids Theological Seminary

“For fifty years, the author’s reputation for biblical precision has been incontestably established. The scholarly footing and foundation of his current offering is another testimony to this reality.”

—George Zemek, Academic Dean, The Expositors Seminary

UNDERSTANDING BIBLE TRANSLATION

BRINGING GOD'S WORD INTO NEW CONTEXTS

WILLIAM D. BARRICK

Kregel
Academic

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“A beautiful and at the same time a true wife
is as great a rarity as a good translation of a poem.
Such a translation is usually not beautiful when it is true,
and not true when it is beautiful.”[1]
—Moritz G. Saphir

For my wife Barbara, who is both beautiful and true—better
than any translated poem can ever be.
She is beyond red coral gems in value (Prov. 31:10).
Of all my encouragers for this book,
she has always been foremost.

I am also thankful for the Bengali Bible translation team
members with whom I worked in Bangladesh (1981–1996):
Lynn Silvernale, Basanti Das, Polycarp Dores,
Shamsul Alam Polash, Harold Ebersole,
Vic and Joan Olsen, and Ron Perrine.
You all schooled me in the classroom
of Bible translation field work.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ASV	American Standard Version
AYBC	Anchor Yale Bible Commentary
BCOT	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament
BDAG	Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago, 2000
BDB	Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford, 1907
BEC	Baker Exegetical Commentary
BHGNT	Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament
BHHB	Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible
CCL	Chakma Common Language Bible
CEB	Common English Bible
CJB	Complete Jewish Bible
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
DBY	English Darby Bible
DRA	Douay-Rheims American
EBC	Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. 12 vols. Grand Rapids, 1979
EEC	Evangelical Exegetical Commentary
ERB	Rotherham Emphasized Bible
ERV	English Revised Version

ESV	English Standard Version
GKC	E. Kautzsch, ed. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. 2nd English ed. Trans. and rev. by A. E. Cowley. Oxford, 1910
GNT	Good News Bible (see TEV)
GNV	Geneva Bible
GWT	God's Word Translation
HALOT	Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, eds. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden, 1994–99
HBI	Frederic Clarke Putnam. *Hebrew Bible Insert: A Student's Guide to the Syntax of Biblical Hebrew*. Quakertown, PA, 1996
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
IBHS	Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, IN, 1990
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ISBE	James Orr, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, 1939
ISV	International Standard Version, New Testament
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JPS	Jewish Publication Society Bible
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
KEL	Kregel Exegetical Library
KJV	King James Version
LB	Living Bible
LEB	Lexham English Bible
LXX	Septuagint
MBCL	Muslim Bengali Common Language Bible
MIT	MacDonald Idiomatic Translation, New Testament
NAB	New American Bible, Revised
NAC	New American Commentary
NAS	New American Standard Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible, Update
NCV	New Century Version

NET	New English Translation (or NET Bible)
NEB	New English Bible
NIVUK	New International Version (UK)
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	Willem A. VanGemeren, ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, 1997
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIRV	New International Reader's Version
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Bible (see TNK)
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBB	Old Bengali Bible (sometimes known erroneously as the "Carey Bible")
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNT	Bishop's New Testament
REB	Revised English Bible
SBCL	Standard Bengali Common Language Bible
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
TCL	Tripura Common Language Bible
TDOT	G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Translated by John T. Willis, et al. 15 vols. Grand Rapids, 1975–2006
TEV	Today's English Version (see GNT)
TLOT	Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA, 1997
TNK	New Jewish Publication Society (see NJPS)
TNT	Tyndale New Testament
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

TWOT	R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. 2 vols. Chicago, 1980
v., vv.	verse, verses
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WEY	Weymouth New Testament in Modern Speech
WYC	Wyclif Bible
YLT	Young's Literal Translation
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ZECOT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament

PREFACE

Shortly after our arrival in Bangladesh as missionaries, a Bangladeshi pastor visited our flat. After a time of pleasant conversation and a cup of tea, he said farewell, walked out the drive, and disappeared among the crowd of people on the street. Then our younger son exulted, “Wow! I didn’t realize I could speak Bengali so good!” Swapon spoke English with an obvious Bengali accent—an accent quite foreign to our ten-year-old son. Our son mistook accented English for actual Bengali. If only learning a foreign language could be that easy. After joining the Bible translation team in Bangladesh, I soon discovered that translating the Bible can be a daunting task in which knowledge of the receptor language is but one of many difficult challenges a translator faces.

Bible translation might be compared to reconstructing and restoring a great palace from antiquity. The aim of reconstruction is to restore the palace to its original form and beauty so that present-day viewers might see it as it once existed when it reverberated with life and court officials pursued their administrative responsibilities within its decorated walls. The Bible is an ancient book written in languages surviving in similar, but not identical, forms to those spoken and written long ago. Translators employ linguistic analysis in an attempt to gain a clearer understanding of those languages as they were spoken in antiquity. They labor to reproduce the exact meaning of the ancient text. The Bible translator aims at helping the modern reader come as close as possible to understanding what the original hearers and readers understood when they interacted with the biblical text.

Bible translations affect their readers, whether for ill or for good. A clear perception of the principles and process of Bible translation provides a number of benefits:

- heightened awareness of resources for unlocking misunderstood or difficult to understand passages of the Bible
- fuller understanding of the ministry of Bible translation on mission fields around the world
- better evaluation of Bible translations for personal and congregational use
- better knowledge of what is involved in academic preparation for Bible translation ministries
- more solid basis for determining how one might become involved in Bible translation ministries

Fifteen years of Bible translation experience in Bangladesh contribute to my background for writing a book of this nature. Like many missionaries, I became involved in far more than I had originally intended. As well as Bible translation, I worked in the areas of training nationals, translating materials for Sunday school and for the Bible institute, church planting, and mission administration. Even in Bible translation, the primary project (the Standard Bengali Common Language Bible, SBCL) provided opportunities to be involved in other Bible translations. In one way or another (sometimes nothing more than helping to train national translators), I participated in the Muslim Bengali Common Language Bible (MBCL) and a variety of Bangladesh tribal translations for the Bawm, Chakma, Tripura, Mro, Marma, Garo, and Sadri. In addition, work began on a regional dialect, Chittagonian, and a revision of the older Bengali Bible translation originated by William Yates back in 1834 after William Carey's death. Since leaving Bangladesh, I have contributed to the English Standard Version (ESV, Job), the NET Bible (NET, Job and Leviticus), and Lexham English Bible (LEB, Job and Leviticus).

Fifty years have passed since I first started teaching biblical Hebrew. Preparing for and teaching Old Testament studies on the seminary level involves engaging ancient biblical translations like the Greek Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, Hebrew texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Syriac Peshitta, and the Latin Vulgate. My exposure to Bible translation was expanded by comparing Bible translations in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, and Urdu with the Bengali projects and teaching overseas. Short-term visits to speak or teach in Albania, Croatia, Germany, Portugal, Ukraine, Russia, South Africa, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, India, Myanmar, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, and the Philippines add to ever-increasing contacts with different languages and cultures. Translating extrabiblical materials from Akkadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, Latin, Moabite, Edomite, Ammonite, and Egyptian continues to increase awareness of translation practices and perils.

All of that experience and exposure has taught me there is much yet to accomplish in the realm of Bible translation. My prayer is that this book will capture the minds and hearts of people who will commit themselves in some fashion to the ministry of Bible translation. Our churches must take up the great and rewarding challenge of Bible translation. Evangelism and church planting cannot proceed without the Word of God in the language of the people whom the missionary desires to impact with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church itself is founded upon Scripture (Eph. 2:20, "the apostles and prophets"). Every major incursion of the gospel into another culture, whether in China or among the Navajo, in Germany or among the Watusi, has focused on providing the Bible in the heart language of the target audience, for "faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17 NASB).

The writing of this book began over twenty-five years ago when our SBCL project coordinator, Dr. Lynn Silvernale, suggested I write a small booklet about our project and Bible translation methodology. Many drafts disappeared in the flood of changes over time as a full book began to emerge. My wife, Barbara, bore patiently the long hours I spent immersed in writing. Colleagues and friends (too many to mention here by name) offered valuable suggestions and advice. Shawn Vander Lugt and Laura Bartlett, my editors at Kregel, patiently walked me through the final formatting, edits, cover design, and promotion. A special thanks also to Dennis Hillman at Kregel who first encouraged the publication of this book and endured my seemingly endless delays long enough to see it to completion.

CHAPTER 1

BECAUSE THEY UNDERSTAND

A HUMID TROPICAL HEAT BLANKETS THE MOSQUE. Children chanting their lessons in Arabic lend an air of charm and mystery to the scene. In the distance the ringing of bicycle rickshaw bells punctuates the intermittent silence. Then a babble of children's cheerful voices cascades over the courtyard as they crowd into a single classroom. They settle into their cross-legged seating upon bamboo mats on the hard clay floor and a hush descends over the room.

Bustling into the room and confronting his visitors, a white-bearded mullah inquires, "Did you give this book to my son?"

"Yes," I replied. The book is a paperback edition of the Muslim Bengali Common Language (MBCL) New Testament.

"You didn't give me one," he protests.

"I will give you a more nicely bound edition for yourself," I promise.

As the principal, the mullah oversees the madrassa (an Islamic day school) housed in a suburban neighborhood mosque in Chittagong, Bangladesh. His son serves as one of the teachers in the madrassa. Squatting down beside me where I am sitting on the floor, the elderly gentleman holds the book in his outstretched right hand. "Can you read this book?" As he asks the question, he places the Bengali New Testament in my hands.

"Yes. May I choose the passage?" He tilts his head slightly to convey his positive response—a gesture common to all Bangladeshis.

Watching us intently are about forty young students between the ages of eight and fifteen. They sit on the floor around us, filling the classroom.

With a few softly spoken words, the mullah instructs a student to take the Qur'an off its stand in front of us. The student carefully removes the Qur'an and wraps it in a protective cloth. Then he gently and respectfully places it on a shelf in the wall.

My missionary colleague and I marvel at the alacrity with which the students obey their elderly principal. In but a brief minute or two, he summarily sets aside the scheduled reading of their highly revered holy book. Perhaps he is being extravagantly gracious and hospitable to two American missionaries. After all, we are not free to go until our hosts have served us some tea and "biscuits" (actually, we would call them "cookies"). Then again, he might be deeply interested in what this new book has to say.

Having obtained his permission, I open the book and begin. When I finish reading the passage, the seemingly quiet and gentle man proves how insistent he can be. He snatches the book from my hands—I'm thinking, "Now I've done it!"—and, amazingly, he continues to read aloud to the end of the chapter. This senior Muslim cleric has just participated in a public reading of Luke 5:12–39. It is but the start of an extended relationship providing years of opportunity to present the gospel to two of the madrassa's teachers. From the beginning, the Word of God displays its power to attract and to alter a person's mind and heart.

Communicating in the People's Vernacular

Five hundred years earlier, on the opposite side of the world from Bangladesh, an Italian duke desires to own a sparrow hawk for hunting. He writes in formal Latin to a village mayor requesting that a sparrow hawk (*accipetrem*) be captured, tied up in a sack, and sent to him. When the letter is delivered, it provokes a good deal of concern. The villagers take it as a demand for the seizure and delivery of their popular archpriest (*arciprete* in their common Italian dialect). They know of no reason why the duke should be so displeased with the priest, but feel compelled to fulfill his request. Therefore, they seize the bewildered priest, bind him hand and foot, deposit him inside a heavy cloth sack, and deliver him to the duke's palace.

At the palace the package baffles the receiving official. "Do you have a letter?" he asks. A quick reading of the letter reveals the nature of the villagers' misunderstanding. Being informed of the situation, Duke Borso, in a diplomatic move to preserve the villagers' face, returns the priest with a letter informing them that he has changed his mind and that they may free the priest. From that time on, the duke writes to his vassals in their common language, not in official Latin.[2]

Over and over throughout its history, the Christian church has, unfortunately, repeated Duke Borso's mistaken use of formal language to communicate with ordinary folk. True to the biblical commission to evangelize (Matt. 28:19–20), Christians rightly attempt to convey the gospel concerning Jesus Christ to every possible language group in the world. Too often, however, Bible translators choose to employ a formal literary language instead of a common vernacular (i.e., the common language of the common person). The elderly cleric in the madrassa enthusiastically received the translation of the New Testament in the Muslim Bengali dialect because it spoke to him in his heart language. Missionary and national translators did not select a Hindu dialect for reaching out to Muslims, nor did they employ Christianized Bengali ignoring common Islamic vocabulary. The madrassa principal could understand what was read and he could easily read it for himself. The translation spoke directly to him without any linguistic barrier.

By the Holy Spirit's enablement, the living and active Word of God is the only instrument that can convert the human heart (Rom. 10:17; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). No matter how many testimonies of conversion an unbeliever might hear, testimonies can only attract. God employs only the Word itself to accomplish the actual conversion. That biblical truth provides adequate authority and motivation for the inclusion of Bible translation ministries in the gospel outreach of the church among all peoples and language groups.

Historians agree that Scriptures in the vernacular acted as catalysts for the Reformation.

In various eras of church history, Christian translators have too often avoided vernacular translation, resulting in a divided church. During the most extreme times of division, the scholarly, cloistered clergy stand on one side of the divide, while on the other side sits a biblically illiterate laity. In the time leading up to the Reformation the debate intensified between adherents to a formal language and adherents to a common language in Bible translation. Historians agree that Scriptures in the vernacular acted as catalysts for the Reformation. William Tyndale biographer David Daniell is very specific: “The energy which affected every human life in Northern Europe, however, came from a different place. It was not the result of political imposition. It came from the discovery of the Word of God as originally written, from Matthew—indeed, from Genesis—to Revelation, in the language of the people.”[3] Vernacular translation, however, did not make its first appearance on the stage of church history at the time of the Protestant Reformation. In fact, the concept and practice of vernacular Bible translations was *re*emerging following a long dormancy. Before taking up that history, we must consider briefly the question concerning the necessity of vernacular translation.

Why should the Christian church produce vernacular Bible translations? Pragmatically, individuals benefit from being able to read the Scriptures for fifteen minutes without becoming bored or bewildered by the style of the translation itself. So, Bible translations must be readable. The fact that the Bible is an ancient religious volume does not require a modern English translation to sound as though the Venerable Bede (672–735) himself had been resuscitated to write it in the patois of the thirteenth century. Nothing within the teaching of the Scriptures requires that the receiving language be as ancient as the Bible itself.

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Many Bible translations employ a Hebrew-flavored language for both Old and New Testaments. This fact is equally true whether the receptor language is English, German, Bengali, or Swahili. In the modern world, White House news reporters do not write, “The President of the United States opened his mouth and spoke,” nor do sports reporters announce that “Steph Curry dreamed a dream last night.” Why then should translators retain a rendering that is practically incomprehensible to modern English readers? Compare the following two translations of Amos 4:2–3.

The Lord GOD hath sworn by his holiness, that, lo, the days shall come upon you, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks.	"The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.
And ye shall go out at the breaches, every *cow at that which is* before her, and ye shall cast *them* into the palace, saith the LORD. (KJV)	And you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead; and you shall be cast out into Harmon," declares the LORD. (ESV)

Granted, the second might be a clearer translation, but is either version as understandable in its English to modern readers as its original Hebrew to those who heard Amos proclaim his message? Should the translator or the reader be satisfied with a murky rendering? Are there sound theological or linguistic reasons for obscurity in a Bible translation? As we proceed with an examination of the history of Bible translation, as well as the principles and practices of Bible translation, we will discover answers to such questions.

A Greek Old Testament for Greek-Speaking Jews

Even before the time of Christ, Alexandrian Jews translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in order to make it more widely available to both Jews and Gentiles who possessed little or no knowledge of biblical Hebrew. Jewish translators gathering first in Alexandria, Egypt, in the middle of the third century before Christ, permanently changed the history of the Bible with their translation of the five books of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy).[4] For the first time in its history, men translated the Bible into what, at the time, was a nonbiblical language. Up until then, serious-minded Jews transmitted the text in its original languages (Hebrew and Aramaic). The rabbis point out that all three divisions of the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) contain portions in Aramaic. An Aramaic place-name is to be found in the Torah, or Law (Gen. 31:47); one verse of Aramaic is found in the Nebi'im, or Prophets (Jer. 10:11); and, a considerable portion is found in the Kethubim, or Writings (Dan. 2:4–7:28; Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26). "Let not the Aramaic be lightly esteemed by thee, seeing that the Holy One (blessed be He!) hath given honour to it in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings" (Palestinian Talmud, *Sota,* vii, 2). Jews and Christians alike have come to refer to the pre-Christian Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible as the Septuagint, meaning "seventy" (often abbreviated by the Roman numerals LXX). Its title originated from the tradition that seventy-two

Jewish scholars had participated in the translation of the Torah (the five books of Moses).[5] Eventually, second-century Christian writers selected “the seventy” as a nice round number by which to identify the translation.

During the writing of the New Testament, the Septuagint reigned as the Bible of choice, since the Hebrew text was not as readily available.

During the writing of the New Testament, the Septuagint reigned as the Bible of choice, since the Hebrew text was not as readily available. Therefore, when New Testament writers wished to cite the Old Testament, nearly seventy-five percent of the time they chose to quote the Septuagint or its equivalent.[6] In the early centuries of the Christian church, the church fathers relied heavily on the Septuagint for citing the Old Testament in their theological treatises, commentaries, and correspondence. F. C. Conybeare and St. George Stock, in their *Grammar of Septuagint Greek*, make the following observation:

> St. Augustine remarks that the Greek-speaking Christians for the most part did not even know whether there was any other word of God than the Septuagint (*C.D.* XVIII, 43). So when other nations became converted to Christianity and wanted the Scriptures in their own tongues, it was almost always the Septuagint which formed the basis of the translation. This was so in the case of the early Latin version, which was in use before the Vulgate; and it was so also in the case of the translations made into Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, and other languages. The only exception to the rule is the first Syriac version, which was made direct from the Hebrew.[7]

The Greek language of the Septuagint is Jewish Hellenistic Greek.[8] Linguistically, Septuagint Greek is not really a separate dialect of Greek, because the translators did not choose to utilize strictly Jewish vocabulary or phraseology. Apparent Semitic influences in both grammar and vocabulary may best be explained as a reflection of either translation philosophy and technique, or cultural influence (an extralinguistic factor).[9] The translators normally chose to render the Hebrew text literally, employing legitimate Greek vocabulary and grammatical constructions. The resulting Greek is not a formal literary Greek as much as it is the spoken Greek of the Jewish community residing in Egypt in the third century B.C. The Septuagint might well be considered the first vernacular translation of the Scriptures. Therefore, the New Testament writers employed a vernacular translation when quoting the Old Testament, not a formal literary translation.

Vernacular translation, as opposed to a formal literary translation, prevailed for the first translation of both Old and New Testaments into an extrabiblical language, the Syriac Peshitta. “Peshitta” means “simple” or “common.” The translation began sometime in the second century A.D. and came to its standardized form around A.D. 400. Jerome’s Latin Vulgate (completed just a few years after the standardization of the Peshitta) was also in the vernacular—thus the title “Vulgate,” meaning “vulgar” or “common.” These three ancient versions (Septuagint, Peshitta, and Vulgate) laid the foundation for vernacular Bible translations. Most subsequent pre-Reformation translations adhered to the same translation style.

A Bible for English Ploughmen

Nearly sixteen hundred years after Alexandrian Jews translated the Old Testament into Greek, John Wyclif (1330–84), the “morning star of the Reformation,” declared that the Scripture should be available in a language common people can understand. Before the Reformation had gotten under way in Europe, he argued that God gave the Scriptures for all mankind:

> Christ and His Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them. It is certain that the truth of the Christian faith becomes more evident the more faith itself is known. Therefore, the doctrine should not only be in Latin but in the vulgar tongue and, as the faith of the church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in a true sense the better. The laity ought to understand the faith and, as doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand.[10]

Spurred on by his belief, Wyclif pioneered the translation of the Bible into English. However, many of his countrymen did not share his vision. At that time, the Roman Catholic Church considered any Bible translation in the common language of the people to be heretical. Henry Knighton, a Catholic historian of Wyclif’s day responded to the concept in the following manner:

> Christ gave His Gospel to the clergy and the learned doctors of the Church so that they might give it to the laity and to weaker persons, according to the message of the season and personal need. But this Master John Wyclif translated the Gospel from Latin into the English—the Angle not the angel language. And Wyclif, by thus translating the Bible, made it the property of the masses and common to all and more open to the laity, and even to women who were able to read . . . . And so the pearl of the Gospel is thrown before swine and trodden underfoot and what is meant to be the treasure both of clergy and laity is now become a joke of both. The jewel of the clergy has been turned into the sport of the laity, so that what used to be the highest gift of the clergy and the learned members of the Church has become common to the laity.[11]

It has been said that Wyclif's translation determined which dialect would become the standard for England. However, Wyclif did not directly influence the establishment of Midland English as the standardized common language of England. London's prominence and England's geography and demographics affected that development more profoundly than any individual like Wyclif.[12] On the other hand, it would be correct to conclude that Wyclif disrupted the tyranny of the clergy[13] and interrupted the dominance of their Latin when he took his theological reasoning to the common people in the common language.[14] The English vernacular's rise displayed "double significance. It was a victory of the people's language over the Latin language of the learned few, and at the same time it was the victory of a popular vernacular (English) over what in England was an aristocratic vernacular (French)."[15]

German Bibles for Germany

Yet another great Bible translator in the period of the Reformation was Martin Luther. Historians, artists, and filmmakers focus on the Protestant Reformer's bold and confrontational actions and words. As a result, the church's collective memory highlights the nailing of his ninety-five theses to the cathedral door at Wittenberg and his bold stand at his trial in the Diet of Worms. These colorful and memorable scenes tend to overshadow his role in the translation of the Scriptures. Luther, however, was not the first to translate the Bible into German. According to John Reumann, before Luther's German translation, there had been others:

> Ufilas had put the Bible into Gothic before he died in A.D. 383, thus providing the oldest literary monument in a Germanic language. There are frag-

> ments preserved of a Frankish translation of Matthew, dated A.D. 738. Some unknown "German Tatian" provided a harmony of the gospels through a ninth-century translation. By the end of the Middle Ages, German manuscripts of the Bible numbered in the thousands. What is more, there were also German translations in print before Luther's day. The first printed Bible in any modern European language was the German version from the press of Johann Mentelin of Strassburg in 1466, and that translation went back to the fourteenth century. In all, four Low German translations and fourteen High German had appeared in print before Luther ever began his work. Eight to ten thousand vernacular copies were on the market, each costing the equivalent of a town house or fourteen oxen.[16]

By paying such prices, German laity demonstrated how highly they prized their German Bibles. Within fifty years, the Strassburg German translation (1466) from the Latin Vulgate went through eighteen editions.

History's verdict in land after land and century after century is clear: A Bible in the language of the learned or the aristocracy does not become the people's Bible. Since the Word of God is for all people, it must be made available in the language of the people. Every Bible translator and each translation team must identify the level and style of the average person's language within their target group. A Bible translation in any other level or style steps backward toward the pre-Reformation tyranny of a professional priesthood. Translators tend to choose language type and language level in accord with their convictions regarding the authority of Scripture, the priesthood of every believer, the role of the church, and the universality of the gospel. Insistence upon a high language level and formal style reflect a practical denial of those tenets. Those who held these doctrines became the champions of common language translations in the Reformation. The Reformation witnessed a logical and happy congruence of theology and translation.

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In every area of Christian endeavor, the labor of one individual is often multiplied many times over by those whom he or she has influenced. A seemingly endless chain of interrelated ministries grows into an overflowing river of blessing. In like fashion, Luther's Bible translation in the vernacular German spawned a number of Reformation Bibles:

- Low German translations based on Luther's High German
- A Dutch translation of Luther's New Testament (1523)
- A Danish New Testament (1524) heavily dependent on Luther's German translation
- A Swedish New Testament (1526) by a blacksmith's son who had attended Luther's lectures
- An Icelandic New Testament (1540) borrowed extensively from Luther
- A Finnish Bible translation (1548–52) begun by a Finn acquainted with Luther
- A Modern Greek Pentateuch (1547)
- The Gospels in Polish (1551–52)
- A Hebrew New Testament (by 1600) for missionary work among Jews.
- A Slovenian Bible (1584) published at Wittenberg
- A Croatian New Testament (1562–63) for Slavs
- Prior to 1555 the English translations of Tyndale and Coverdale were influenced by Luther's work.[17]

All of these translations had a common thread: they were translations for common people in the language of the people. Leaders of the Reformation believed that God never intended His Word to be the property solely of the clergy. The Bible confirms this truth: in the Old Testament, the Lord demanded obedience from the people, not just the priests; in the New Testament, Christ spoke His parables and taught His doctrine to the common people of Israel. He did not confine Himself to the temple in order to teach only the doctors of Mosaic Law. Since the target of Scripture's teaching has always been the common person, its language has always been the common person's language.

Obedience Proportionate to Understanding

Bible translation in the vernacular is rooted and grounded in the teachings of the Word of God itself. God purposes to communicate with mankind so that a person might know who God is and what He requires.

How does God convey that communication? He chooses to utilize hearing and reading. A person can neither believe nor understand what he or she has not heard or read.[18] In addition, merely hearing or reading without understanding cannot produce full obedience. God's Word in an understandable language stimulates the proper response. A seminary professor wrote, "In Bible translation, faithfulness to the original meaning of a text is important, but it is not enough. The other critical test is what it enables its readers to understand."[19]

The challenge of Bible translation, therefore, is to make the Word of God understandable. It is one of the greatest challenges to which the Christian exegete or expositor might respond.

The challenge of Bible translation, therefore, is to make the Word of God understandable. It is one of the greatest challenges to which the Christian exegete or expositor might respond. Understanding is the goal of all proclamation of Scripture (see Matt. 13:13–15, 19, 23). Without understanding the Scriptures, a person is unable to implement biblical instruction through obedience. Without obedience there is no divine blessing. The more accurate one's understanding, the more exactly and fully he or she will obey, and the fuller the resulting blessing.

One's own language—the language of his or her everyday existence—acts as the most efficient medium for understanding the Scriptures. When dire circumstances press upon us and we cry out to God for help, we do so in our own heart's language. We normally do not respond with some formalized and archaic liturgical language. In other words, we cry out, "Please, God, don't let this happen to me—not here, not now!" instead of "Our Father, Who art in heaven; hallowed be Thy name. . . . O God of heaven and earth, halt Thou this turmoil that hath engulfed me!" No matter how many languages we speak, we most readily pray and dream in our native tongue. That language must become the Bible translator's language—the common language of the common people in any one cultural setting. It might be Arabic or Zulu, Bengali or Yaqui, Chinese or Xhosa. It could be a major dialect or a small tribal tongue. No matter what its identity or linguistic behavior, it exists as the heart language of a people to whom the church should proclaim God's Word. They comprise a people, a language group, for whom Christ accomplished His redemptive work. He redeemed them "from every tribe *and tongue* and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9 NASB, emphasis added).

> ***Translating the Bible into the common language of common people is an uncommon challenge that produces an uncommon reward.***

Translating the Bible into the common language of common people is an uncommon challenge that produces an uncommon reward. Each individual has the joy of explaining some aspect of life to an eager young learner. It may be a subject as theologically profound as the Trinity or as down-to-earth simple as gravity. One person utilizes amazing plants like the Venus flytrap and the closing leaves of a mimosa to explain the marvels of creation. Another may enlist a clear plastic model of an automobile's combustion engine as a teaching tool. Whatever the occasion or whatever the subject matter, there is no greater reward than to witness a young person's glowing countenance when understanding comes. Likewise, beaming faces and shining eyes testify to the dawn of spiritual understanding when it comes through the instrumentality of an understandable translation of the Bible.

How Can They Understand?

In Bible college and seminary I fulfilled the obligatory translation assignments from both the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament. My teachers awarded grades for accuracy, but the process was often purely academic. I possessed no deep sense of divine accountability for such assignments. My heart was not burdened by the potential of misleading a reader who depended upon my translation for knowing the will of God. However, when I became a Bible translator in Bangladesh, all of that changed. A professor's grade was not my goal. How individuals understood my translation might determine whether they might come before the Lord with an adequate or an accurate understanding of His demands for them. As a result of fifteen years of Bible translation experience in Bangladesh, I returned to the seminary classroom determined to help students look upon their translation assignments with a heightened sense of accountability. How might any reader understand or react to their translation? Yes, accuracy matters, but so do understandability and clarity.

A spelling mistake might turn a serious text into a real laugher.

Translation involves more than just getting the meaning right; it involves correct spelling, in order to avoid misunderstanding. Spelling in one's own language is difficult enough; spelling in a second language is sometimes a nightmare. In English, I had only one *d* and one *t* to remember and to employ accurately. Bengali presented me with four *d*'s and four *t*'s! Proper spelling is important when it comes to Bible translation. A spelling mistake might turn a serious text into a real laugher. Consider a translation of Genesis 37:34 that one of my seminary students submitted to me: "he put sack cloth around his waste." Confusion between two homonyms (similar sounding words: "waist" and "waste") results in a very different mental picture. Instead of Jacob wrapping himself with sackcloth as a symbol of his mourning, the reader pictures him bagging his trash (or worse). In this case, the error was harmlessly committed in an academic environment. What if such an error were to slip into a published translation of the Bible? How many might be misled? Unbelievers in Mongolia or Montana, India, or Indiana, who possess little familiarity with the Bible, will not always be able to filter out erroneous translations as they read. Attention to detail must be the hallmark of every Bible translator. Accuracy depends upon it. Right understanding depends upon it.

Misspelling a word is one kind of potential error. Let's consider what happens when translators ignore just one little word in the original languages of Scripture. English versions commonly translate the command of the Holy Spirit in Acts 13:2 as something like, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (NAS; compare NIV, KJV, NKJV, ESV, NRSV). All of these translations ignore the little two-letter word *dē* (pronounced like "day") following the imperative "set apart" in the Greek text. Translators often treat that little word as though it were nothing more than a marker of "relatively weak emphasis—'then, indeed' or frequently not translated but possibly reflected in the word order."[20] J. P. Louw and Eugene Nida suggest the translation, "set apart for me, then, Barnabas and Saul to do the work for which I have called them."[21] However, A. T. Robertson, a venerated Greek scholar, indicates that this Greek particle, though difficult to translate, remains strongly emphatic.[22] Combined with an imperative (as in Acts 13:2), it conveys a "note of urgency."[23] The nature of the particle is such that no translator should omit it from the rendering of the verse.[24] Therefore, translators should consider wording the Holy Spirit's command in such a way that it conveys the concept of "do it immediately." The premier Greek lexicon of H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott supports Robertson's view of the particle by indicating that it is "used to give greater *exactness*, to the word or words which it influences . . . *now, in truth, indeed, surely, really* . . . often with Superlatives, . . . *quite* the greatest, *confessedly* the best . . . ."[25] What difference does it make? Omitting the force of this one tiny Greek particle reduces the sense of urgency with which the Holy Spirit addresses the Antioch church's leadership. Those men who received the Spirit's instruction clearly understood the urgency, since they apparently commissioned Saul and Barnabas for missionary service immediately following the completion of their prayer and fasting. In the SBCL and MBCL Bible translations we employed the adverb "now" (Bengali, *ekhon*) to represent the Greek particle ("set them apart now"). The discussion of this particular Greek particle should not be taken as a claim that all particles should be translated. As D. A. Carson points out, "precisely because particles are subtle things, one can always find instances where any particular translation has it wrong."[26]

One verse's treatment in a Bible version does not necessarily characterize the overall translation philosophy and accuracy of that version.

How do these observations about Acts 13:2 affect an individual's understanding of the role of translation, the evaluation of translations, and the practical use of various Bible translations? Being aware of the potential for error in a translation should make each person aware of the fact that no translation of the Bible perfectly conveys every detail of the original languages in every passage. Also, one verse's treatment in a Bible version does not necessarily characterize the overall translation philosophy and accuracy of that version. We will pursue the topic of evaluating English Bible versions in chapter 8.

As a result of the matters we have discussed above, certain recommendations might be offered regarding the use of Bible translations.

- *Use a variety of versions in order to compare translations.* Through multiple translations, readers might become aware of details they sometimes miss in one translation as compared to another.
- *Refer to good commentaries based upon the original languages of Scripture.* By utilizing such tools, readers might discover which translation most closely represents the meaning of the original text.

Unfortunately, virtually every available English version provides incomplete or inaccurate translations of a few texts like Acts 13:2. However, the reader may rest assured that such situations are rare occurrences. Despite the variations one finds between popular English Bible translations, those versions testify to the faithful preservation of the God-given text with but rare exception. As a result, texts like Acts 13:2 and their less than accurate translation seldom affect major doctrinal teaching. But, having no major doctrinal implication need not eliminate the significance of each and every detail within the text. No Bible translator has the freedom to select certain elements of biblical content for preservation and to excise the remainder from the text. A translation must be fully accurate, not selective or partial in its translational integrity.

Despite the variations one finds between popular English Bible translations, those versions testify to the faithful preservation of the God-given text with but rare exception.

Ezra and the Books of Moses

When their exile in Babylon ends, the Jews return to Judah under the patronage of Cyrus, king of Persia. Back in the land out of which God had evicted them, they face external opposition from the Samaritans (Ezra 4–5; Neh. 4; 6). Their internal problems include the treatment of the poor (Neh. 5) and the divisiveness of intermarriage with Gentiles (Ezra 9–10). The latter problem creates a multilingual situation in Israelite homes (Neh. 13:23–24). That only intensifies the language problem the exiles bring with them from their captivity in Babylon, for most of them no longer speak Hebrew.

Yet, in the midst of all their problems, the people of Israel hunger for the Word of God. They desire divine direction so that God will not uproot them from their land again because of their disobedience to His teachings. The returned exiles express a desire to gather at the Water Gate in Jerusalem, and they request Ezra to read the Law of Moses to them (Neh. 8:1). The first day of the seventh month begins the civil New Year and the observance of the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23–25; Num. 29:1–6). Thus, the Israelites make some preparations for the occasion. Carpenters construct a platform of wood so that the gathered Israelites will be able to both see and hear Ezra (Neh. 8:4). Timing and arrangements are purposeful, but the eager attentiveness of the people is spontaneous (Neh. 8:3).

Ezra discerns that the people of Israel need spiritual revival. Indeed, he understands that obedience to the Scriptures will provide the catalyst for such a revival. He realizes, too, that obedience is predicated upon understanding. If the people cannot understand any particular instruction, they cannot obey fully—the more complete the understanding, the more complete the obedience. With this in mind, Ezra appoints men to help him in the task of proclamation, translation, and interpretation (Neh. 8:4, 7–8).

A threefold process takes place on the day of assembly. First, Ezra and some of the appointed men read aloud the text of the Law of Moses in the ancient Hebrew language in which it had been written: "They read from the book, from the law of God" (Neh. 8:8 NASB). Second, they translate the text into the language most returnees best understand after seventy years of Babylonian captivity. At the time, Aramaic, the language of Babylon, dominates as the language of the common Israelite. Interestingly, modern Hebrew script reveals just how much the Babylonian exile affected the people of Israel linguistically. What we call the "Hebrew" script today is actually an Aramaic script borrowed from Babylon.[27] The borrowing can be dated to the time of Ezra. Two different phrases in Nehemiah 8:8 may be interpreted as a reference to translation: "distinctly, and gave the sense" (KJV/NKJV)—compare ESV ("clearly, and they gave the sense"), NIV (“making it clear and giving the meaning”), and NASB (“translating to give the sense”). In other words, the best interpretation of the verse as a whole indicates that Ezra and his fellow teachers translated the reading of the Hebrew text into the more commonly understood Aramaic.

Third, Ezra and the leaders working with him cause the people “to understand.” The words “understanding,” “understand,” and “understood” occur repeatedly in Nehemiah 8 (vv. 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, and 13). It is significant that the record of the events of that New Year’s Day emphasizes understanding. The purpose of translating and interpreting is that people might understand (v. 8). The Israelites rejoice because they understand (v. 12). They even assemble again for that same purpose (“to understand,” v. 13).

Hearing the Scriptures in their heart language, the people understand it so well that it produces a degree of obedience not seen in nearly one thousand years. They set about to observe the Feast of Booths in complete compliance with the Law of Moses. Not since the time of Joshua has there been such a complete and accurate observance of the Feast of Booths (v. 17). Out of such obedience even greater joy emerges (v. 18). What is more, one of Scripture’s most beautiful prayers (Neh. 9) results from the experience of such understanding and obedience. All these things (the obedience, the joy, the prayer, and the ongoing desire to know more) arises out of understanding—an understanding rooted and grounded in the Aramaic vernacular translation, which they now understand better than they do the original Hebrew.

Vernacular Bible translation is an imperative, not an option.

For such a spiritual experience to occur in the present, ministers of God’s Word must give equal attention to the production of an understandable translation of the Bible. Anything less results in the perpetuation of spiritual mediocrity—a mediocrity that could continue for more than a thousand years like it did in ancient Israel. Vernacular Bible translation is an imperative, not an option.

Jesus and the Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1–23 offers many enticing tidbits for the interested reader’s study. Two significant statements occur in verses 19 and 23. Just like

Nehemiah 8, the key concept repeated in Matthew 13:1–23 is *understanding* (vv. 13, 14, 15, 19, and 23). In His interpretation of the parable of the sower (vv. 19–23), Jesus makes it clear that dissemination of God's Word depends upon understanding His words. If recipients of God's Word do not understand the words, Satan ("the wicked one") will be victorious (v. 19). On the other hand, if hearers and readers understand the Word, fruitfulness results and God will be victorious (v. 23).

Believers normally desire two spiritual products in their lives: joy and fruitfulness. Obedience to Scripture produces both. The more completely the believer understands Scripture, the more completely obedient he or she can be. Difficulty in understanding a Bible translation hinders the highest degree of obedience, thereby diminishing joy and fruit, or shutting down these two products completely. Translations difficult to understand tend to be unfruitful. If a Bible translation is too easily misunderstood, it can produce confusion, satanic interference, and spiritual starvation.

Lest we overstate the matter, it is true that a proper understanding of Scripture does not rest with translation alone. Translation does not eliminate the need for exposition and teaching. Nor does translation ignore the responsibility of the reader of God's Word to obey what they do understand. Adding too much to the text in the service of clarity can force a translation into the realm of inaccuracy and the insertion of too much subjective interpretation. As Sijbolt Noorda explains, "Ancient texts, and especially ancient religious texts, are not conspicuous by their clarity. We'd better be prepared in their case for some opacity, some obscurity. . . . We should practice restraint, avoiding excessive explanation and explication."[28] George Steiner simply states: "Bad translations communicate too much."[29] Translators too often face the temptation to overinterpret. Leland Ryken rightly complains about this very problem with many dynamic equivalence translations. In his words, "A translation that substitutes an interpretation for what the original actually says . . . removes the foundation on which to build a trustworthy interpretation of a text."[30]

Difficult as it might be, translators must allow the biblical text to force readers to think, rather than to be lazy in their approach to the text. Wisdom literature (as in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and some psalms in the Psalter) purposefully utilizes some ambiguity and incomplete statements to cause the hearers and readers to cogitate. God did not design Scripture to encourage lazy thinkers. Instead, He commands believers, "prepare your minds for action" (1 Peter 1:13 NASB; compare NKJV, "gird up the loins of your mind"—an apt cultural figure describing how a man in ancient times would tuck his long robe into his belt in order that his legs be unhindered in running or working). God desires that we use the minds He gave us. He demands we put them to work when we read His written Word.

With God's command in mind, how much interpretation should a translation reflect? What kind of interaction should exist between translation and exposition? Does the New Testament itself provide any direction concerning these matters? Its writers often translate Hebrew texts from the Old Testament and Aramaic statements from their own immediate environment into Greek. Should we follow their model? In order to answer that question, we now turn to a significant example in Acts 8.

Philip, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and Isaiah

When persecution came to the church in Jerusalem, a deacon named Philip (Acts 6:5) became an evangelist in Samaria (Acts 8:4, 5; 21:8). According to Acts 8, an angel from God directed Philip to "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (v. 26). Finding an Ethiopian eunuch in a chariot headed back to his home country, Philip hears him reading from a scroll the eunuch evidently had purchased before leaving Jerusalem. Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (v. 30). This high official from the court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia appears to be a proselyte to the Jewish faith. A comparison of Acts 8:32–33 with Isaiah 53:7–8 reveals that he is reading the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. Greek is not his heart language, but it is the *lingua franca* (a convenient language for trading goods) of that day. Further investigation uncovers the fact that the Septuagint's translation of Isaiah 53:7–8 is "gravely deviant."[31] In spite of the handicaps, enough of the truth comes through with Philip's helpful guidance so that the eunuch comes to Christ by faith for salvation from his sins.

Until he clearly understands the Bible's message, the Ethiopian official cannot come to Christ. Theological realities (see John 8:43–44; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 4:18) and language barriers both impair his understanding. Even though the Ethiopian has some proficiency in Greek, the poor quality of the translation hinders his understanding. Miraculously, the Holy Spirit intervenes to compensate for the deviant translation (Acts 8:29). In this situation the Spirit intervenes by sending Philip to provide a more accurate translation and explanation.

From this brief account in Acts 8 we learn several facts about Bible translations:

- *God can use a second language or even a deviant translation to bring people to Christ.* The Scripture in flawed Greek speaks to the Ethiopian's heart and stirs him to believe in Christ.
- *A translation may be so poor that by itself it cannot be the instrument of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration.* The Septuagint Greek translation of Isaiah 53 is too flawed to bring the Ethiopian all the way to a complete saving knowledge of Christ without adequate instruction from someone like Philip.
- *Understandability is the key factor in regard to the efficacy of a Bible translation.* Only when the eunuch understands what Isaiah says does he believe in Christ and experience Holy Spirit regeneration.

The Holy Spirit normally operates by convicting the heart of the person who is reading God's Word in his native language.

We must realize that the understanding produced by the Word of God commences on the linguistic level, then moves to the spiritual. A missionary should not distribute Greek New Testaments to Americans, Mexicans, Ugandans, or Thais with the expectation that God will perform a miracle and allow the recipients to understand the Greek. The Holy Spirit normally operates by convicting the heart of the person who is reading God's Word in a language he or she understands—especially one's own language. Granted, believers, as well as unbelievers, will always find portions of the Scriptures difficult to fathom spiritually, even if the language itself is perfectly understandable. As Charles Taber points out,

> Understanding is never instantaneous nor is it "perfect or total. It can and does improve with time, and becomes sufficient for all practical purposes; and one can understand parts of M [the message] very well. But there is always room for growth and correction in our understandings. And yet through this humanly imperfect process, the marvel is that God speaks to

> us with power and clarity from the Scriptures, so that one can learn to know him, and to discern and do his will."[32]

But, that does not release the translator from the responsibility of rendering the Scriptures as clearly and accurately as possible. According to Peter, the epistles of the apostle Paul contain "some things hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16 NKJV). Peter does not mean that Paul's vocabulary and grammar are too sophisticated, odd, foreign, or outdated. Spiritual concepts are the heart of the problem. Bible translation ministries must focus on the nuts and bolts of communication (and thus, of translation)—in other words, on language itself.

Some people, like the Ethiopian of old, read portions of the Bible in their second or even third language. No substitute exists, however, for reading God's Word in one's first language. Consider the testimony of a present-day "Ethiopian":

> Skip Firchow and David Akoitai (ah-KOY-tie) sat at the plywood desk translating Mark's Gospel into the Rotokas language. A cool breeze drifted through the open window, heralding the rain that fell every afternoon on this Papua New Guinean (PNG) island of Bougainville.
>
> Akoitai re-read the verse they'd just translated. He thought for a moment and then said to Skip, "When I read God's Word in my own language, it's much easier for me to understand than when I read it in English.
>
> "Trying to read the English Bible is like trying to drink out of a cup with a lid on it. I know there's water inside, but I can't get at it. When I read the Bible in Tok Pisin [PNG's main trade language], I understand it a little. It's like I can pry the lid partway off. I can sip some of the water.
>
> "But when I read the Bible in my own language, it's like drinking deeply from a full cup with no lid! My thirst is quenched. I understand completely."[33]

After nearly two thousand years of church history, one would think that at least the major languages of the world would possess understandable translations of the Bible. Even major languages, however, may have Bibles whose language the common person finds difficult to understand.

Bengali, the language of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) and India's West Bengal, is one such language. According to the eighteenth edition of the Summer Institute of Linguistics's *Ethnologue* (SIL International, 2015), 245 million Bengali-speaking peoples comprise the world's tenth largest language group (surpassed in populations only by speakers of Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Malay, Russian, French, and Portuguese—in that order). In 1966 the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE) established a team of missionary and national translators to produce a new Bengali Bible in Bangladesh. Principles and practices learned in that translation project form a large part of my own experience in Bible translation and form a background for this book.

Since the first Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) 2,300 years ago, Bible translation history chronicles the spread of God's Word to the farthest corners of the globe. A common language Bible for common people is that history's hallmark. The principle is rooted and grounded in the teachings of both Scripture Testaments. Ezra's public reading of the Law, Jesus Christ's parable of the sower, and the account in the book of Acts concerning the conversion of the Ethiopian all provide a powerful witness to the role of understanding how Scripture impacts people's lives.

The Reformation gave birth to a new eruption of Bible translations. In the past two centuries since William Carey's remarkable translation work in over forty Indian languages, Bible translation once again flourishes. The Bengali Common Language Bibles in the Muslim (MBCL) and the standard (SBCL) dialects serve as a recent example. Reading from the Gospel of Luke in the madrassa marked a seminal moment in my understanding of what effectively communicating the Word of God across linguistic and cultural boundaries involves. If Viggo Olsen[34] had not heeded God's leading into a ministry of Bible translation, that Muslim dialect Bengali New Testament would not have been available and I would not have had the experience of reading it in the mosque. Literally thousands of Muslims in Bangladesh have come to faith in Jesus Christ through that translation. Its language is their language, but its message is God's message. The language barrier has been shattered, now the Spirit of God is at work to tear down the spiritual barriers.

In the next chapter, we will examine common language translation more closely. How does one identify a so-called "common language"? What makes a particular Bible version a common language translation?