THE TRANSLATION PROCESS OF *GOD'S WORD*

GOD'S WORD®
TO THE NATIONS

MISSION SOCIETY

Foreword

GOD'S WORD® was produced to meet a need unmet by other Bible translations: the need for a Bible that is both accurate by scholarly standards and written in readable, natural, everyday English.

Some Bible translations are very scholarly in their approach to translation but use a form of English that requires readers to understand words, sentences, and phrases in ways that are not natural to the way in which American English is spoken or written. Other translations have sacrificed accuracy in their attempt to be easy to read and understand.

GOD'S WORD was produced using a theory of translation that combines accuracy with understandability. This theory is called *closest natural equivalence*. In short, closest natural equivalence concentrates on accurately translating the *meaning* of the original languages into natural English. At the same time, closest natural equivalence retains as many of the unique characteristics of the original text as possible without making the English translation unnatural or harder to understand than the text was in the original languages.

This booklet explains closest natural equivalence and how closest natural equivalence is achieved. This booklet also explores some specific challenges faced by the translation team as they produced *GOD'S WORD*.

The Theory Used to Produce
GOD'S WORD

Closest Natural Equivalence

Closest natural equivalent translation attempts to be exactly what its name implies. Above all else, it provides readers with a meaning *equivalent* to the source language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek in the case of the Bible) in the target language (English in the case of *GOD'S WORD*). Second and equally important, it seeks ways to express that meaning *naturally* in a way that a native English speaker would have spoken or written. Finally, it expresses the meaning naturally in a way that is *as close as possible* to the way the source language expressed the meaning.

In closest natural equivalence, meaning and naturalness are equal partners. If the proposed words of a translation have the potential to convey the correct meaning of the source text but are not natural for English readers, most readers will probably not understand the text correctly. Likewise, if a translation is very natural English but does not convey the meaning of the source text well, most readers will probably misunderstand it. Thus, two important principles of closest natural equivalence are

- a translation that is not natural in the target language is not equivalent to the source text, no matter how well it may match the source text on a word-by-word basis
- target language naturalness by itself does not ensure a good translation

However, closest natural equivalence does more than achieve a combination of meaning equivalence and naturalness. Closest natural equivalence preserves many of the characteristics of the source text (e.g., style, modes of expression, etc.).

For instance, the following is one common expression in the Bible that describes how God used his power to free his people from Egypt:

ביר חזקה ובזרוע נטויה

This phrase is often translated into English as "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." While *mighty hand* clearly and naturally communicates to readers that God was using his power, *outstretched arm* does not. In English the picture painted by *outstretched arm* could be one of greeting or reconciliation or one of weakness because the arm is overextended. Some Bible translations have recognized this problem. For example, one English Bible translates this phrase "with his great power and strength." While this communicates the meaning of the Hebrew well, it loses the vivid metaphorical language because the concrete words *arm* and *hand* are reduced to the abstract concepts of *power* and *strength*. Closest natural equivalent translation avoids both the unnatural translation found in many English Bibles and the meaningful but less vivid translation offered by others. In *GOD'S WORD* the phrase is translated "with his mighty hand and powerful arm."

GOD'S WORD does not indiscriminately use any one of many possible natural equivalent translations. It insists on the *closest* natural equivalent in order to translate meaning clearly while preserving the text's literary integrity.

Contrasting Closest Natural Equivalence to Form Equivalence

Most well-known English Bible translations were produced using the traditional approach to translation which is called *form equivalence*. Most translations of the Bible available in bookstores today use some variation of form equivalent translation

Strict form equivalence translates word-by-word, matching each Hebrew or Greek word with one or more English words. However, strict form equivalence would produce very difficult English. For instance, John 3:16 would read:

> This way for loved the God the world so that the son the only he gave so that all those believing in him would not perish but have life eternal.

Since grammar and syntax vary from one language to the next, adjustments have to be made when moving from the source language to English. If adjustments are not made, the resulting translation would be difficult, if not impossible, for most readers to understand. For this reason, no translation is strictly form-equivalent.

In essence, form-equivalent translations adjust the grammar and syntax of the source language text only enough to produce a reasonably recognizable and understandable English translation. They do not adjust the English any more than necessary. Form-equivalent translation results in an English text that is a combination of English words, some English syntax, and some Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek syntax. For instance, one Bible's translation of Numbers 35:18 is

> Or anyone who strikes another with a weapon of wood in hand that could cause death, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death.

At other times form equivalence produces translations that appear to be natural English and that make sense in English. However, the meaning of some form-equivalent translations in English does not match the meaning of the source language because an idiom or figure of speech in the source language means something different in English. While form-equivalent translation is often called *literal translation*, it can present a text whose meaning is literally wrong for English readers.

For instance, the beginning of Psalm 1 in one Bible translation reads:

> Blessed is the man who does not... stand in the way of sinners.

In English this says that someone who avoids stopping sinners from sinning is blessed. However, the Hebrew text means that a person who does not join sinners in sinning is blessed.

Another example is Genesis 27:19:

קום־נא שבה ואכלה מצידי

... Stand up, sit down, and eat this meat I've hunted...

The form-equivalent translation given here matches the Hebrew quite nicely on a word-by-word basis. However, it has a confusing (and perhaps amusing) meaning in English. קום can mean *to stand up*, but it is often used to signify that the speaker is urging someone to do the action of the following verb. קום may not always need to be translated. In fact, translating it in this case is confusing. Using form equivalence can make the translation harder to read than the source text was.

Contrasting Closest Natural Equivalence to Function Equivalence

Because of the problems associated with form-equivalent translation, another translation theory was developed. It is called *function-equivalent translation.* (An older name for this theory is *dynamic-equivalent translation.*) Function equivalence takes the differences between the source language and the target language seriously.* In function equivalence the translator's goal is to ensure that the meaning of the translation to a native speaker of the target language is the same as the meaning of the source language text. The function equivalent theory is not concerned with preserving the maximum number of characteristics (e.g., word order, grammar, syntax, idioms, etc.) of the source language text. It recognizes that if a translation preserves the maximum number of these characteristics, it is often unnatural in the target language.

Function equivalence is a great advance in translation theory. It helps the translator to focus on the goal of translation and not merely on technical matters concerning the source language. Function equivalence avoids producing translations that would convey the wrong meaning, no meaning, ambiguous meaning, or that would contain bad grammar or style. It conveys the meaning of the text in ways that are natural and meaningful in the target language.

While the function equivalence theory of translation has the proper focus, in practice it has produced English translations that have lost some of the source text's meaning. One reason for this is that translators using function equivalence have often attempted to translate the Bible so that all passages can be understood on a common, predefined conceptual level.

For instance, one Bible translation available today is marketed in an edition specifically translated for children. While many parts of the Bible are appropriate for children, other parts were never intended for children. Certainly, Song of Songs is not for children. Job is a complicated and difficult book in Hebrew. In trying to make these books function on levels for which they were not intended, the

---

*See *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* by Jan De Waard and Eugene A. Nida (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986).

translators risk miscommunication by oversimplifying or destroying the literary or artistic integrity of the text they are translating .

In printed texts meaning is conveyed not only by words and sentences, but also by the author's choice of literary devices based on his assumptions about his readers' concerns and their ability to think abstractly, and by his skill in using language. In the Bible these factors vary from book to book. A translation must take into account not only how meaning is communicated in the target language, but also on what level that meaning was intended to be communicated by the original author in the source text.

One function-equivalent translation states in its preface that it is intended to "be read with ease and understanding by readers of all ages." That is, every book of the Bible is intended to be clear to children as well as adults. However, Paul probably never envisioned his letter to the Ephesians as being read by children. To make Ephesians understandable for children, this function equivalent translation from Ephesians 1:19 says

I want you to know about the great and mighty power that God has for us followers.

The phrase *great and mighty power* translates the Greek words υπερβάλλον μέγεθος της δυνάμεως. In this translation most of the meaning of the Greek word υπερβάλλον has been lost. It does not merely mean *mighty*, but means *surpassing, extraordinary*, perhaps even *limitless*. However, since these more abstract concepts are difficult for children, this function-equivalent translation has simplified the language-but with a loss in meaning.

Some of the books of the Bible contain material that is very difficult to understand. Others contain relatively easy-to-understand material. Translators should not make the text more difficult to understand in the target language than the source text was (as form equivalence can do). However, translators should also not assume the responsibility for making the text simpler than the source text was (as function equivalence can do).

Closest Natural Equivalence Maintains the Balance

Closest natural equivalence shares some of the concerns of function equivalent translation: It focuses upon meaning and naturalness in the target language. However, closest natural equivalence does not attempt to make all books or passages function on the same level. The more difficult books of the Bible (e.g., Job, Ephesians) are translated to be on the same level of difficulty as they are in the original languages (but no more difficult).

Closest natural equivalence also shares some of the concerns of form equivalent translation. For example, abstract concepts in Greek and Hebrew are translated into abstract concepts in English, and concrete concepts remain concrete in translation. Figures of speech are translated by figures of speech in English when possible. Poetry is not prose with a special layout on the page. Instead, poetry is translated as poetry.*

Closest natural equivalence's emphasis on naturalness in the target language may, at times, force a compromise. Some metaphors in Hebrew may have to become similes in English to communicate properly. At other times, figurative language cannot be translated by an understandable figure of speech in English. The difference between closest natural equivalence and form equivalence is that a form, such as a metaphor, is not forced into English in closest natural equivalence. On the other hand, the difference between closest natural equivalence and function equivalence is that a metaphor will not be eliminated. A way will be found to express it in natural English.

The goal of closest natural equivalence is to communicate as much of the source text as possible in a way that is usable for the type of readers that the original author targeted. At the same time, closest natural equivalence recognizes that not every book of the Bible was intended for every reader. Therefore, in *GOD'S WORD* Ecclesiastes is harder to read than Genesis. Second Peter is more difficult than Mark. The Scriptures contain a variety of writings. Novice Christians can find portions that speak clearly to them. As they grow and mature, they can find other

---

*Like much poetry, biblical poetry is not characterized by pretentious language or artificial meter and rhyme. However, its modes of expression, including parallelism and vocabulary, are distinct from prose.

portions that challenge them further. Closest natural equivalence recognizes that translation should not obscure meaning and make the Bible more difficult to read than it ought to be (as form equivalence may do). But closest natural equivalence also recognizes that Scripture allows for growth and maturity. Therefore, closest natural equivalence does not simplify concepts or run roughshod over the literary artistry of the Scriptures (as function equivalence may do).

Since closest natural equivalence attempts to balance these and many other factors, translation can never be completely objective. It involves subjective judgments. Even when operating under the assumptions of closest natural equivalence, translators cannot produce a perfect translation. Translators use cautious judgment and maintain a keen awareness of all the factors needed for a full understanding of the source text. Among other things, translators need to understand the original language's grammar and syntax, appreciate and understand literary devices used by the original authors, understand what kind of audience the original author had in mind when writing, and understand the modem target audience and its language. Because these factors call for balance and judgment, every translation (even those produced using closest natural equivalence) can be improved. However, one major reason for the high quality of *GOD'S WORD* is that closest natural equivalence was the theory used in its production. Moreover, the translators of *GOD'S WORD* understood that natural, readable English was not merely a matter of writing simplified English. A number of factors contribute to making an English text readable and these factors also must be balanced.

The Process Used to Produce *GOD'S WORD*

An Overview of the Process

The process used to produce *GOD'S WORD* made use of the talents of a wide variety of people. At the core of this effort was a full-time translation team composed of biblical scholars who served as translators, English experts who constantly reviewed English style, and professional production personnel.

The basic process could be outlined as

1. Translation
2. English Review
3. Peer Review
4. Technical Review
5. Review by Book Editorial Committees
6. Review by Old and New Testament Editorial Committees
7. Review by Consultative Committee
8. Review by Bible Editorial Committee
9. Typesetting

In the first step of this process a biblical scholar used the principles of closest natural equivalence to produce an initial translation of one of the books of the Bible. He consulted with the rest of the translation team as needed while producing this first draft.

When the translator had completed his translation of a particular book, the translation was reviewed by an English reviewer. This expert in English style read the translator's text and suggested changes. The English reviewer was primarily concerned with naturalness in English. However, computer technology allowed the English reviewer to check carefully and ensure that any proposed revisions would not destroy the translation's consistency.

When the English reviewer had finished reading and reviewing the text, the translator and the English reviewer worked together to produce a second draft that improved the naturalness and the accuracy of the translation. These two initial team members served as resources for the rest of the editorial process.

After English review, the draft was turned over to the other translators and English reviewers for comments. This peer review stage allowed the other members of the translation team to compare the draft with their own work, to offer suggestions for further improvement, and to maintain consistency from one book of the Bible to another.

The translator and English reviewer incorporated all appropriate suggestions offered in the peer review stage to produce a third draft. This draft was submitted to technical reviewers—clergy, college professors, and seminary professors. These technical reviewers submitted written suggestions for improvements in the translation.

The next step in the process produced a fourth draft of the text. An editorial committee, composed of members of the translation team, met to read and discuss the text for each book of the Bible. They offered their own suggestions and took into account the comments of the technical reviewers.

The final step for the editorial committee was reading the text aloud. Since the Bible is not only read silently but also read aloud in worship and instructional settings, the importance of having a Bible that can be understood when read aloud should not be underestimated. When people read the Bible to themselves, they can stop and reread anything that is not immediately understood. However, when they listen to the Bible being read aloud, they have only one chance to grasp the meaning of the words. Unlike those who read the Bible in a private setting, hearers cannot stop and analyze what they have heard as long as the reader continues to read.

After the book editorial committee had finished its work, the fourth draft was sent to the members of the consultative committee. This group of over 50 Christian leaders from various denominations was invited to submit comments and suggestions.

The final editorial changes were made when all the books of the Bible had been completed or were near completion. Old and New Testament Committees and a Bible Editorial Committee looked at the accuracy and readability of the text. This final draft was then typeset, proofread, and sent to the publisher.

Communicating in Natural English

Throughout this process the translation team focused on producing a translation for native speakers of English. The goal was to use wording that would be natural for those who use English as their primary language.

Unfortunately, language changes over time. The English language is not the same today as it was in Shakespeare's day. In fact, language even changes subtly from one generation to the next. *GOD'S WORD* is published for a readership that spans several generations-a translation that can be read by grandparents as well as their grandchildren. Therefore, the translation team had to choose English that would communicate to as many current English speakers as possible.

Because of this concern for communicating in natural English, the translation team included full-time English reviewers who were involved throughout the process. This procedure has never been used before on a major English Bible translation. Many Bible translations have used English consultants who advised the translators on general matters of English style and perhaps suggested some changes in the final draft. However, *GOD'S WORD* is the first to make English reviewers partners with the translators.

The concept of using native language experts as partners in Bible translation was developed on the mission field. When the Bible is translated into a language for the first time (often a language which has never had any written material), it is done by m1ss10nary translators. Because these missionary translators are not native speakers of the language into which they are translating, they work with a co-translator, a native speaker of the language. The co-translator helps to ensure that the translation reads naturally for native speakers.

While all of the translators of *GOD'S WORD* were native English speakers, the English reviewers were as important as the co-translators on the mission field. They worked with the translators to ensure that the English used was not a scholarly type of English or that the translators had not unconsciously bent the English language toward Hebrew or Greek modes of expression which communicate incorrectly in English.

The English reviewers carefully compared parallel sections of the Scriptures, such as similar stories in the Gospels. They also helped the translators match

identical Hebrew or Greek passages in various parts of the Bible so that the English translation of similar passages is identical where the Hebrew or Greek is identical and different where they are different.

The Use of Computers in Producing *GOD'S WORD*

Another important facet of the production of *GOD'S WORD* was the use of computers. *GOD'S WORD* is the first English Bible translation produced entirely on computer. Every draft of every book was produced on computer. Computers not only provided advantages in speeding up the process but also allowed translators and English reviewers to search each other's work and ensure consistency throughout *GOD'S WORD*. By using computer searches, an English reviewer could check how many times-and in what contexts- a particular word or phrase had been used.

The translators used an on-line computer service to search the texts of major U.S. newspapers and magazines. They were able to get an idea of the frequency of certain words and phrases in common English. The search results affected word choice in the translation. By searching a range of nationally distributed publications, the translators could determine whether or not a particular word or phrase had become archaic.

English reviewers had instant access to other English translations on computer. This allowed them to check *GOD'S WORD* against other types of translations to see how others in the past had expressed certain Greek or Hebrew phrases in English. Computer software that tied English words to the underlying Hebrew or Greek words gave the English reviewers the ability to identify all other occurrences of a Hebrew or Greek word. This allowed them to double-check the accuracy and consistency of the translation.

In addition, the translators had the entire original language texts of the Bible as well as Hebrew and Greek technical resources available on computer. The translators could thoroughly research a Hebrew or Greek phrase throughout the Bible. By using software that made other English translations accessible on computers, a translator could quickly discover how a particular Hebrew or Greek word had been translated by others.

Finally, computer technology allowed the translation team to compile style guides and lists of commonly occurring Hebrew and Greek words and phrases. These documents helped the team work together to produce a translation that is consistent in style and wording.

Readability and *GOD'S WORD*

The Concerns and Aims of Readability

The study of what makes a text readable was first undertaken by educators about 60 years ago.* They wanted textbooks and other reading materials used in schools to be understandable to students. For this reason, the readability of a text is often given as a number representing a grade level. However, assigning a grade level to a written work is not an exact science. Most grade level assignments are based on numerical formulas that count sentence length (most often in words) and word length (most often in syllables).

Computers can quickly count words and syllables and compute a grade level according to a formula. Even some sophisticated word processors on personal computers are able to produce a grade level analysis and a few other statistics relating to readability.

While helpful, these formulas have limitations. While sentence length and word length are very important factors in determining whether an English text is readable, they are not the only factors. In addition, these formulas were never intended to be guides on *how* to write. They were intended to help analyze a text *after it has been written.*

Alice Davison notes, "Since formulas do not define the sources of difficulty, they cannot be used as guidelines for writing."** Davison points out that readability formulas do not identify what specific feature makes a text difficult to read. While long sentences generally are harder to read, some short sentences can also be very hard to read. Some long sentences can be very easy to read. Therefore, making a text readable is a matter of balancing a number of factors.

---

*See Jeanne S. Chall, "The Beginning Years" in *Readability: Its Past, Present, and Future.* Beverley L. Zakaluk and S. Jay Samuels, eds. (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1988), pp. 2-13.

**Alice Davison, "Assigning Grade Levels without Formulas: Some Case Studies" in *Readability: Its Past, Present, and Future.* Beverley L. Zakaluk and S. Jay Samuels, eds. (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1988), p. 37.

GOD'S WORD was produced to be as readable as possible. The translators and English reviewers took many factors that affect readability into account during their work. Furthermore, since some parts of the Bible are written on different levels than others, assigning a grade level to a Bible translation is a very inaccurate way to judge how easy it is to read.

Factors Affecting Readability

The following are some of the factors that the translation team for *GOD'S WORD* took into account.

1. Reducing syntactical complexity

   a. **Sentence length.** Shorter sentences tend to be less difficult to read because they contain fewer ideas and fewer connections between ideas. However, variation in sentence length is desirable. A text that contains only short sentences becomes monotonous to read. A text that contains only long, complicated sentences is difficult to read. While some portions of the Bible are difficult for translators to break into shorter sentences, doing so can be accomplished with the proper effort and care. One example is Ephesians 1:20-21. In one modern English translation these verses are translated as one sentence containing sixty-two words. In another translation they are a fifty-five word sentence. In *GOD'S WORD* these verses read:

      He [God] worked with that same power in Christ when he brought him back to life and gave him the highest position in heaven. He is far above all rulers, authorities, powers, lords, and all other names that can be named, not only in this present world but also in the world to come.

      GOD'S WORD does not use short sentences in these verses (which would involve a loss of meaning). Yet, the translation does avoid translating these verses as one long sentence.

   b. **Number of clauses.** Sentences containing more than one clause are harder to read, since the reader must be able to understand the connection between the thoughts contained in the various clauses. *GOD'S WORD* avoids multiple clause sentences where appropriate.

c. **Number of prepositional phrases.** Sentences that contain a pileup of prepositional phrases can be difficult to read. The translation team for *GOD'S WORD* used prepositional phrases where necessary and carefully chose the prepositions that were used.

d. **Modifier depth.** Modifying one word with a number of modifiers adds complexity to the thought of a sentence. The phrase "the big, dappled, gray, galloping horse" contains four modifiers for the word *horse*. *GOD'S WORD* avoids multiple modifiers where possible.

e. **Modifier distance.** Words that modify another word in a sentence should be as close as possible to the word they modify. For instance, 1 Samuel 25:34 in one translation reads:

> Otherwise, as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak.

The phrase *who has kept me from harming you* modifies LORD, but is separated from LORD by the phrase *the God of Israel* (which also modifies LORD) and the verb *lives*. The same verse in *GOD'S WORD* reads:

> But I solemnly swear—as the LORD God of Israel, who has kept me from harming you, lives—if you hadn't come to meet me quickly, Nabal certainly wouldn't have had one of his men left at dawn.

f. **Voice.** Passive verbs contribute to making a sentence more complex. Passive constructions not only require more words, but also obscure the real source of the action. *GOD'S WORD* uses passive constructions where appropriate, but avoids overusing them.

2. Reducing semantic complexity

a. **Infrequently used vocabulary.** Between eighty and ninety percent of the vocabulary used in common English consists of the 220 most frequently used words. Words that are used infrequently are more likely to be misunderstood. However, to translate the meaning of much of the Bible accurately, some less frequently used English words are needed. One example is the word *lyre*. A lyre is a musical instrument similar to a harp.

Harps are also mentioned in the Bible. In fact, over twenty passages contain both *lyre* and *harp*. In cases like this, *GOD'S WORD* would use the more difficult word *lyre*, not only for accuracy, but also to be able to distinguish this word from *harp*. While *GOD'S WORD* tries to avoid infrequently used words, it does recognize the need to use them in some cases. However, *GOD'S WORD* uses more familiar words whenever possible.

b. **Technical vocabulary.** Many words have meanings that are used in a specialized field of study or vocation. These words are important for those who are in those fields, but they communicate poorly to those who are not. *GOD'S WORD* avoids using technical terms when acceptable alternatives are available.

c. **Multisemantic words and phrases.** The translation team for *GOD'S WORD* avoided using words and phrases that could have more than one meaning in context. For instance, Joel 2:11 in one translation reads:

> The day of the LORD is great;
> it is dreadful.
> Who can endure it?

Joel 2:11 in *GOD'S WORD* reads:

> The day of the LORD is extremely terrifying.
>   Who can endure it?

d. **Polysyllabic words.** Generally, the fewer syllables a word has, the more readable it is. *GOD'S WORD* uses shorter words when they can be appropriately substituted for longer ones.

e. **Affixes ratio.** Words with suffixes and prefixes tend to be harder to read because they add another element of meaning that readers must understand. English uses many affixes, and any English text will contain many affixed words. *GOD'S WORD* uses as few words with affixes as possible.

f. **Anaphora.** Anaphora are words or ideas that are repeated. To avoid repeating a noun, a pronoun can be used. However, if the noun to which the pronoun refers is not clear to the reader, repeating the noun may be preferable. The translation team of *GOD'S WORD* examined anaphora closely throughout the translation process.

g. **Concept density.** Concept density refers to the number of ideas contained in an expression. A sentence that contains many ideas is harder to read because readers have to spend extra energy analyzing the text. Sentences with fewer ideas are more readable. *GOD'S WORD* breaks distinct ideas into separate sentences when possible. For instance, Romans 5:17 in one translation reads:

> For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

This sentence is so complicated that most people won't understand it. It contains forty-one words, at least five major concepts, eight prepositional phrases, and three verbs. In addition, it is a conditional sentence. *GOD'S WORD* translates this verse as

> It is certain that death ruled because of one person's failure. It's even more certain that those who receive God's overflowing kindness and the gift of his approval will rule in life because of one person, Jesus Christ.

In *GOD'S WORD* the verse is two sentences with a total of four prepositional phrases. No sentence has more than two verbs. The average sentence length is nineteen words in contrast to forty-one words. The number of concepts per sentence has been reduced without any loss of meaning.

h. **Abstract versus concrete words and phrases.** Abstract concepts add difficulty to a text. Concrete words are more easily understood. At times, using one abstract word may produce a shorter sentence than using a concrete phrase in its place. However, the shorter sentence may actually be harder to understand because it is less specific. (See the example of the use of *mighty hand and powerful arm* discussed earlier.)

Since readability is determined by many factors, making a text readable is not a matter of mechanically applying a number of rules. Sometimes these factors conflict with each other. In these cases judgment is required to determine which is more important for a particular sentence based on its context. This is a challenge for translators, because translators, unlike authors, cannot decide to change what the text means to make it more readable.

The translation team for *GOD'S WORD* weighed the various factors that affect readability as they produced the translation. The readability of *GOD'S WORD* is not an accident. It is the result of the translation team's careful use of readability principles.

Communicating with the Proper Words

Word Choice in *GOD'S WORD*

The theory of closest natural equivalence and the factors that affect the readability of a text made word choice an important part of the work of the translation team that produced *GOD'S WORD*. The team chose words that were natural in context and that were as easily understood as possible without losing accuracy and faithfulness to the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible.

However, producing a consistent and accurate translation is more than making a translation decision on a word-by-word basis from Genesis to Revelation. Translators have to take into account how each Hebrew or Greek word relates to other Hebrew or Greek words. That is, they need to understand the words as part of the Hebrew and Greek language systems. As part of a system, words are related in meaning to one another, and those relationships are not only complex, but also unique to each language. This requires translators to match the complex relationships among words in Greek and Hebrew to the equally complex relationships among words in English.

One of the ways the translators of *GOD'S WORD* did this was by grouping words according to the components of meaning they share with one another. Words that share a component of meaning are said to be in the same *semantic field*.

For instance, a native speaker of English can easily name a number of words in the semantic field for color: red, orange, green, blue, pink, white, black, violet, purple, gray, etc. These words relate to each other in specific ways. Some of them are thought of as part of a spectrum of colors. Some are opposites (black, white). Others are synonyms or nearly synonymous (violet, purple).

Translators face the challenge of choosing the right word for each word that signifies color in Hebrew or Greek. While English speakers may use *violet* and *purple* interchangeably at times, at other times *violet* signifies a difference in shade from *purple*. Another language does not necessarily differentiate colors the same way English does. A translator may not be able to equate *violet* with one word and

purple with another word. The other language may divide the semantic field for color differently. If that is the case, a word in the other language may be translated *purple* in some cases and *violet* in other cases.

This phenomenon of semantic fields is repeated for every concept a language can express. A translator needs to understand how the source language divides meaning in a semantic field and how the target language divides that same meaning. In addition, words can have meaning in more than one semantic field. For example, the English word *ford* can indicate a shallow place to cross a river, a brand of automobile, or a last name.

Translations can be misleading if translators do not understand the relationships between words in a semantic field in both the source language and the target language. In addition, translations can be misleading if the translators do not recognize that a word in the source language is used in more than one semantic field and that the target language uses different expressions in each semantic field.

For this reason the translation team of *GOD'S WORD* compiled lists of words in semantic fields as they studied the relationships between words in Hebrew or Greek. One example is the semantic field for utensils used by the priests in worship:

אנרטל	*knife*
חפור	*bowl*
יע	*shovel*
כיור	*basin*
כלי	*utensil, thing, accessory, furnishing*
כף	*dish*
מזלנה	*fork*
מזמקת	*snuffer*
מזרק	*bowl*
מחלף	*knife*
מחתה	*incense burner*
מלקחים	*tongs*
מנקית	*bowl*
מנרי	*lamp stand*
מקטרת	*incense burner*

סִיר	*pot*
סִירִי	*pot*
סַף	*dish*
סְרִי	*pot*
קְעָרָה	*plate*
קַשָׂה	*pitcher*
קַשְׂוָה	*pitcher*

Some of the items in this semantic field are distinct in English (pot, tongs, plate, pitcher, etc.). Others use distinct terms in Hebrew but cannot be distinguished in English without a long paraphrase. (Note the three terms for *bowl* and the two terms for *dish*.)

In another case the translators of *GOD'S WORD* were careful to note when the words שפחה and עבר ,אמה were used in different semantic fields. Most often אמה and שפחה mean *female servant or slave*, and עבר means *male servant or slave*. However, these words are also used in polite, formal address to a superior. A speaker may refer to herself as אמתר or שפחתר when speaking to a superior, as Abigail does when speaking to David in 1 Samuel 25:28. She says, "Please forgive my offense." If an English translation would read "Please forgive your servant," most English readers will think that Abigail was talking to David about someone else, not about herself.

Normally, speakers can only refer to themselves with the pronouns *I, me, we,* or *us* in English, no matter how formal the situation. (Politeness is indicated in other ways in English. Trying to force *your servant* into a translation to indicate politeness results in an unnatural and confusing sentence.)

In this case the translation team for *GOD'S WORD* recognized that these three Hebrew words function in more than one semantic field. *GOD'S WORD* does not force a word from one semantic field into another semantic field where it does not belong. Instead, *GOD'S WORD* uses the correct words for each English semantic field, even though the Hebrew or Greek languages may use the same word in both semantic fields.
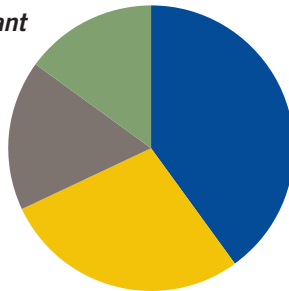
Eliminating Theological Jargon

Another challenge faced by the translators of *GOD'S WORD* was finding words that accurately communicate the meaning of important theological concepts in the Bible. Many of these concepts have traditionally been translated by words that no longer communicate to most English speakers. While these words continue to be used by theologians and even by many Christians, the meanings that speakers assign to them in everyday use do not match the meanings of the Hebrew or Greek words they are intended to translate. The words have become jargon-words with specialized meanings often poorly understood by non-specialists .

To determine how English speakers understand a few key theological terms, *GOD'S WORD* to the Nations Bible Society undertook a survey of lay people who attend Bible classes at their church.* Of five theological terms tested, no term was understood correctly by a majority of the respondents. That is, a majority of the respondents did not give a definition which matched the primary meaning of the underlying *Greek* word. Some of the definitions that respondents gave were correct meanings for the *English* word, but not for the Greek word it was supposed to translate.

One example is the word *covenant.* The survey produced these results:

Definitions given for *covenant*

- Promise/Pledge **40%**
- Agreement **28%**
- Other **17%**
- Don't Know **15%**

---

*For a complete report of the results and a discussion, see Andrew E. Steinmann, "Communicating the Gospel Without Theological Jargon: Translating the Bible Into Reader-Friendly Language."

A large number of respondents understood *covenant* to mean a promise or a pledge, a correct meaning for the Greek word διαθήκη. Many understood it to mean an agreement (an incorrect meaning for διαθήκη), and others gave different answers or did not know what *covenant* means.

In secular Greek διαθήκη meant *last will and testament.* Its primary New Testament meaning is derived from this secular meaning. Most often the New Testament writers used διαθήκη to mean "a unilateral pledge or promise." The English word *covenant* can mean an agreement, a mutually acceptable arrangement, often arrived at through bargaining. However, the Greek word διαθήκη cannot. One Greek dictionary clearly states, "In the 'covenants' of God it was God alone who set the conditions; hence, *covenant* can be used to translate διαθήκη only when this is kept in mind."

If a majority of readers do not understand the correct meaning of the Greek word διαθήκη when they read the English word *covenant*, other words must be used to translate it. *GOD'S WORD* uses the words *promise* and *pledge.*

The situation is even more complicated because many translations use *covenant* to translate the Hebrew word ברית in the Old Testament. ברית can mean *promise* or *agreement*, depending on context. Therefore, a reader's good assumption when reading the Old Testament use of *covenant* becomes a bad assumption when reading the New Testament.

The survey results for *covenant* (forty percent gave acceptable answers) were better than for the other words included in the Bible Society's survey. For instance, only ten percent of the respondents gave a correct meaning for the Greek word διικαιόω when asked to define *justify*. For this reason, the translators of *GOD'S WORD* avoid using words like *covenant, justify, righteous, grace* and others that have become theological jargon and do not correctly communicate the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek words they are translating. In some cases a footnote in *GOD'S WORD* offers the traditional theological terms for those who are familiar with them.

---

*Bauer, Walter, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.* Second Ed. Tr. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, Ed. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Dander. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979). p. 183. The comment in Bauer is intended only to describe the meaning of διαθήκη and not its Hebrew counterpart ברית, which can mean either *agreement* or *promise*, depending on context.

Gender References

The Scriptures contain many passages that apply to people in general. However, the traditional use of words such as *man* to mean "people in general" can no longer be assumed to communicate the Bible's meaning accurately to all readers. For instance, Psalm 1:1 is traditionally translated, "Blessed is the *man* who does not follow the advice of the wicked.... " For many who currently speak English, this translation reads as if Psalm 1 is speaking about blessings *males* receive. However, the psalm is intended to apply to any person. Therefore, *GOD'S WORD* translates the first psalm, "Blessed is the *person* who does not follow the advice of the wicked...."

This concern is not a recent phenomenon. Almost five hundred years ago, Martin Luther expressed the same concern as he translated Psalm 1 into German.* Even the Scriptures themselves give indications that some words should at times be understood as gender-neutral. For example, in 2 Chronicles 28:10 בני ישראל (traditionally *sons of Israel*) is defined as עברים (male slaves) and שפחות (female slaves).

Due to developments in the English language in the last few decades, the concern for appropriate use of gender-neutral language requires translators to avoid producing translations that are read as inappropriately excluding some persons. For this reason, *GOD'S WORD* avoids using words like *man* and the pronoun *he* if the Hebrew or Greek is speaking about people regardless of gender.

In some places gender-neutral language cannot be used because English has no uniquely gender-neutral third person singular pronoun. For instance, Psalm 1:3 in *GOD'S WORD* reads:

> He is like a tree planted beside streams—
> > a tree that produces fruit in season
> > > and whose leaves do not wither.
> He succeeds in everything he does.

GOD'S WORD could have shifted Psalm 1 into plural in verse 1, as some modern English translations do ("Blessed are the people who..."). Then verse 3 would read

---

*Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. *Luther's Works.* Vol. 14 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), p. 288.

"They are like trees…" But doing this changes the psalm's imagery. The psalmist is speaking about a solitary person, who despite pressures from others, remains faithful to God. That person is like a lone tree that God waters and cares for. Making the image into a forest or orchard that God waters loses an important part of the message of the psalm. The comfort of God protecting a faithful person who feels isolated would be lost.

For this reason, *GOD'S WORD* occasionally uses the pronoun he to refer to a single person, male or female. The translation team felt that retaining some singular pronouns was more important than a slavish loyalty to gender neutrality.

In addition, *GOD'S WORD* does not change gender references inappropriately. For example, when Gamaliel addresses the Jewish council in Acts 5:35, he begins ἄνδρες Ἰσρανλʼιται... ("men, Israelites"). Some modern translations have translated this in a gender-neutral way. However, all the members of the Jewish council were men. *GOD'S WORD* recognizes this and translates the phrase as *men of Israel.*

Communication Goes Beyond Words

The Importance of Visual Communication

Much of the effort spent translating the Bible is concentrated on the wording of the text. The correct words arranged in the best possible sentences and paragraphs are critical to communicating the meaning of the Bible.

Yet, *how* the words are placed and arranged on a page is also important. For this reason, English has rules for arranging words in sentences and paragraphs that show the reader where words begin and end (spaces), how thoughts within sentences are arranged (commas, colons, semicolons), where sentences begin and end (capital letters and periods), and where paragraphs begin (indentation).

GOD'S WORD uses standard English punctuation whenever possible. Capitalization is used as it normally would be: at the beginning of a sentence or for a proper noun. Italics are also used as they would be in other printed English texts: for foreign words or to indicate that a word is used as a word.

Another feature of *GOD'S WORD* is that it is printed in a single-column format. Most English Bibles available today are printed two columns to a page. The effect is a dense, difficult-looking page. Such Bibles resemble reference books. A double-column format is not a problem for a dictionary or encyclopedia. Those books are not meant to be read page after page. The publisher expects the user to look up an entry and read only that entry. In a reference book a double-column format saves space.

A double-column format also saves space in Bibles. However, the Bible is not a reference book in which topics are arranged by entries. It is a book made up of many books; none of which were meant to be read as a dictionary or encyclopedia is read.

Single-column format is the preferred format for most books. Even the widely used scholarly texts of the Bible in Hebrew and Greek are printed in single-column format. Like those books, *GOD'S WORD* uses a single-column format to produce an open, inviting page.

The translation team recognized that the page layout of the text is an important part of communicating the meaning of the Scriptures. Care was taken to ensure that the page layout of the Bible would encourage readers to read and would enhance their understanding of its message.

Poetry in *GOD'S WORD*

One of the advantages of a single-column format is that it enables readers to grasp easily the thoughts contained in the Bible's poetry. Except in a few rare cases, biblical poetry was not written in rhyme and did not have an obvious meter. Instead, biblical poetry depends on parallelism-lines of poetry parallel in thought to other lines.

Since *GOD'S WORD* has the entire width of the page available for poetry, long lines do not have to be broken. Lines that were broken were broken with care. The break comes where the cadence of a reader would normally fall. The result is that the reader can see more clearly the parallels between lines. For instance, Proverbs 15:17 reads

> Better to have a dish of vegetables where there is love
> > than juicy steaks where there is hate.

Readers can instantly see that a *dish of vegetables* is parallel to *juicy steaks* and that *where there is love* is parallel to *where there is hate*. If this proverb were contained in a double-column Bible where less space is available for each line, the result could be

> Better to have a dish of vegetables
> > where there is love
> than juicy steaks where there is hate.

While the parallelism still exists in the words, it is not nearly as obvious because of the break in the first line. Instead of understanding line 1 as parallel to line 2, the reader is expected to understand lines 1 and 2 as parallel to line 3. The single-column format enables readers to see parallelism even if they are not aware of the parallelism of biblical poetry.

Another advantage of a single-column is the availability of a number of indentations. This allowed the translation team to communicate a poem's literary style visually. For instance, Psalm 124 in *GOD'S WORD* is

> "If the LORD had not been on our side..."
>> (Israel should repeat this.)
> "If the LORD had not been on our side when people attacked us,
>> then they would have swallowed us alive
>>> when their anger exploded against us.
>> Then the floodwaters would have swept us away.
>>> An ⌊overflowing⌋ stream would have washed us away.
>> Then raging water would have washed us away."
>
> Thank the LORD, who did not let them sink their teeth into us.
> We escaped like a bird caught in a hunter's trap.
>> The trap was broken, and we escaped.
> Our help is in the name of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.

Because of the layout used in *GOD'S WORD*, a number of features of this psalm are immediately apparent to English readers, as they are to Hebrew readers of the psalm. The repetition of "If the LORD had not been on our side" is highlighted because it is flush left with the remaining material indented further. The threefold "then" is also highlighted because a third indent was available. * These are features readily apparent to scholars who read the Hebrew text of Psalm 124 in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. However, they are not apparent in most English Bibles because of the limited indentations available in double-column formats.

Throughout *GOD'S WORD*, the translators paid close attention to the indentation and other layout features of poetry. Because of this, readers do not have to be conscious of the various literary features of the poem before they read it. Instead, the layout visually communicates many of the poem's features.

Lists, Genealogies, and Other Items

Poetry is not the only place where a single-column format is advantageous. Often lists, genealogies, and other items communicate better when they are visually organized. For example, Ezra 1:9-11 appears in *GOD'S WORD* as

> This is the inventory:

gold dishes	30
silver dishes	1,000
knives	29
gold bowls	30
other silver bowls	410
other utensils	1,000

> The gold and silver utensils totaled 5,400.

In other cases, layout combined with boldface type can aid readers in following the flow of a text. For instance, Matthew 1:1-3 in *GOD'S WORD* is

> This is the list of ancestors of Jesus Christ, descendant of David and Abraham.

> **Abraham** was the father of Isaac,
> **Isaac** the father of Jacob,
> **Jacob** the father of Judah and his brothers.
> **Judah** and **Tamar** were the father and mother of Perez and Zerah.
> **Perez** was the father of Hezron,
> **Hezron** the father of Ram,

The single-column format allows this genealogy to be arranged as a list. When the list is combined with boldface type to help readers see the principle ancestor in each line, the combination of the understandable wording of *GOD'S WORD* and its visual communication make the text easy to read and comprehend.

GOD'S WORD communicates visually with a single-column format as well as through words.

The Textual Basis of *GOD'S WORD*

Every Bible translation must decide which Hebrew and Greek texts are the basis for translation. The translators of *GOD'S WORD* used *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* for the Old Testament and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (twentysixth edition) for the New Testament. In general, *GOD'S WORD* translates the texts of these publications.

In some cases the translation team believed that a better reading existed in manuscripts other than the ones on which those publications base their text. In those cases the team translated the text of some other manuscripts. Whenever *GOD'S WORD* does not follow the text of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* or *Novum Testamentum Graece*, it contains a footnote that points this out. In a few cases, the translation followed *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* or *Novum Testamentum Graece* but included a footnote, because the team felt that manuscript evidence for an alternate reading was strong enough to include a note for readers, even though it was not part of the translated text.

The textual footnotes in *GOD'S WORD* are short and simple. They do not contain abbreviations. Moreover, they do not distinguish between various ancient translations in the same language. For instance, *Latin* denotes any one of the several ancient Latin translations of the Bible. While scholars may find this frustrating at times, the footnotes were designed to convey information to the non-specialist in the least complicated and confusing way. The scholar who consults *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* or *Novum Testamentum Graece* will be able to figure out which manuscripts were followed.

In some cases in the Old Testament, the division of books into chapters and verses is different in the Hebrew text than in most English Bibles. Wherever this occurs, *GOD'S WORD* follows the standard English chapter and verse divisions but notes the differences in a footnote.

In a few cases slight differences in verse divisions exist between the Greek text of the New Testament and most English Bibles. Once again *GOD'S WORD* follows standard English verse divisions. However, since these differences are slight (often involving only a phrase or clause), they are not noted.

OUR IDENTITY God's Word to the Nations is a mission society—a mission resource for God's people!

OUR MISSION To identify and empower individuals to take *GOD'S WORD®* to the English-speaking people of the world, focusing especially upon those who do not know Jesus as their Savior.

OUR PROMISE TO OUR PARTNERS Our Society will provide you with superb outreach materials. These materials will enable you to be used by the Holy Spirit to support a movement among God's people to be active participants in his mission *"to seek and to save people who are lost"* (Luke 19:10). To this end we promote the biblical outreach strategy: **Become a Seed Planter and Change Lives.™**

GOD'S WORD®
TO THE NATIONS
MISSION SOCIETY

MAIL PO Box 400
Orange Park, FL
32067-0400

PHONE 877.463.7967

EMAIL bible@godsword.org

WEB godsword.org