

# INTRODUCTION TO INTERPRETING THE SCRIPTURES

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**TRANSLATION, LITERALISM and ORIGINAL MEANING .....2**

**CONTEXT .....2**

**HISTORY .....3**

**INTERPRETATION.....3**

**START WITH WHAT IS SAID .....3**

**LITERAL vs. CONCEPTUAL .....3**

**FOOTNOTES and CROSS REFERENCES .....6**

**CULTURAL IMPACT .....7**

**SOURCE TEXTS: .....8**

**THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES WERE VERY DIFFERENT FROM ENGLISH .....8**

**HEBREW AND ARAMAIC: .....9**

**GREEK: .....10**

**SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF BIBLE TEXTS.....10**

**THE TRUTH AND THE FEAR OF "BEING WRONG" .....11**

**COMPARISON OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS: .....12**

**FUTURE STUDY: .....14**

**FUTURE STUDY: .....14**

**NOTES AND RECOMMENDED READING .....15**

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**TRANSLATION, LITERALISM and ORIGINAL MEANING**

**CONTEXT**

Always read the entire section of a passage that communicates a particular thought. Never read less than one paragraph <sup>6</sup>. If your bible shows each verse as a separate unit, then at least read all the verses that come under one heading.

On the other hand, do not assume that the chapter or verse divisions shown are the correct way to organize a passage. Chapter and verse divisions are not part of the Word of God, nor are the heading titles. They are just a convenient way of identifying the passages. You may want to group the end of one chapter or division with the start of the next one based on the thought being expressed.

Assume that the thought stated is intended by God to be read and to be understood by the readers. God's purpose is to communicate with us.

## **HISTORY**

Remember that the Word of God is completely accurate when it records historical events. These events are recorded to help us understand God's work in the world.

BUT, keep in mind that we should never make a rule, a "doctrine", out of a historical event. In the book of Acts we see believers living in a commune. Does that mean that we should do the same?

## **INTERPRETATION**

Note the way a passage is written. Assume that the words are to be taken at their normal literal meanings <sup>4</sup>.

One word of caution: A particular word does not always have the same meaning. The context makes its intended meaning clear. Take the word "saved": It can mean saved from death, saved from a bad lifestyle, saved from having to talk to Jack, money saved in your account, etc.

If a passage is to be taken figuratively, the context will make that clear, bearing in mind that there are "idiomatic expressions" in all languages (such as "that only scratched the surface", "he got up on the wrong side of the bed", or "by the skin of his teeth").

## **START WITH WHAT IS SAID**

First think about what is actually said. Do not read into the text a pre-conceived notion. Do not assume that the Bible is loaded with symbolism which then needs to be discerned.

Be very careful about looking for verses to support a particular view. If you start out to prove a point, you can easily miss what is actually stated.

## **LITERAL vs. CONCEPTUAL**

Almost no translation can perfectly communicate what another language states. There is nearly always a loss of meaning in any translation.

Each language has its own psychology or ways of thinking of and saying things.

When studying a difficult passage, read other versions of the Bible and compare the thoughts that are expressed. If you are still confused or unsure, consult with a reliable person or commentary who can explain the original language meaning.

**NOTE:** When you find that one version leaves some of the text out, or inserts something, do not immediately assume that it is wrong. It may be that the version you are comparing it to contains the error. (See the notes below about the New Testament Greek texts and accuracy.)

**What has God actually said?** 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states that "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

God lead the writers in what they wrote. That would include the actual words they used. Our problem is that **(1)** most of us can not read those original languages, and **(2)** we do not have the actual originals of the Scriptures.

**Problem 1** can be dealt with by comparing the translations we do have and by reference to explanations by trustworthy students of those original languages.

**Problem 2** has been dealt with by those who have done extensive comparisons of all of the copies of the originals that are in existence. In doing so they have identified where more recent documents insert or leave out something that does not match the earlier ones. They then compare all the earlier ones to see if it looks like they all agree.

Additionally, writings of the early church fathers contain quotations and references that can be very helpful in determining what a particular original text said.

**What does God actually mean?** We need to think about what it is that God is telling us. A "literal" translation of words is sometimes impossible to understand. This is because different cultures use language in diverse ways.

A classic case is the Spanish "Quiero te", which means "I want tea". The Spanish language does often reverse the order of words, compared to English. However, if you reverse the word order and say "Te quiero", you are not saying "Tea, I want" but are actually saying "I love you". The "literal" translation here would be "You, I want", but the Spanish statement does not have the crude sexual implication that the literal English translation has.

### **Illustration:**

Here is a little fictional story to help understand translation.

I tell you, "My neighbor recently got a beautiful new German Shepherd dog. As I drove down the street today, the dog ran across in front of me and I had to hit the brakes hard."

Notice that I said "the" dog, not "a" dog. That leads you to understand that I was talking about my neighbor's German Shepherd which I had just mentioned. In your memory, you went back through my story to find out what dog it was because I used the specific word "the". (The word "the" is called a "definite article" because it refers to some specific, or definite, item.)

But if I had told you, "My neighbor recently got a beautiful new German Shepherd dog. As I drove down the street today, a dog ran across in front of me and I had to hit the brakes hard."

This time I used what is called an "indefinite article", the word "a". Now you do not know what dog was involved. Maybe it was some other one.

I continue, "My neighbor came running out and grabbed the dog...." This time you know the grabbed dog is probably the one that ran in front of me.

"...and I now realized that she also had a Pekinese." OK. Now you know that the dog that ran in front of me was a second dog, not the German Shepherd.

Let's compare this to the verse that the Jehovah's Witnesses mis-translate:

**John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."**

**1. "In the beginning was the Word....":** See the word "the" before the word "Word"? That is significant. It is the same way the Greek text states it. We realize that we are reading about something very specific, and we find out from the rest of the context that it refers to a person, someone we later find out to be Jesus Christ Himself.

**2. "... and the Word was with God ...":** Next, notice that the word "the" is used again with the word "Word" but our English translations do not insert the word "the" before "God". Actually the Greek states, "...and the Word was with the God...". We do not talk that way in English. We understand that the God referred to is the God of Scriptures from the context, but in Greek, the text is pointing out that a specific God is being mentioned.

**3. ".... and the Word was God....":** Here is where it gets to be fun. We understand from the English that John is stating that The Word is Deity, He is God Himself. That is exactly what the Greek text is clarifying, but it does it in a way that our language does not work. You see, there is no indefinite article "a" in the Greek language. So, if the Greeks want to say "a god" they just leave out the word "the".

Well...that is not quite accurate. Greeks also use the word order in a sentence to show a meaning. The actual word order in this verse is "... and God was the Word." In English we would take that to mean that the new subject of the sentence is God, but that is not true in the Greek. In that case they would have said "... and the God was the Word", pointing out that they were talking about the God of Scriptures.

**The JWs** try to say that, because the word "the" is not in front of the word "God" in "the Word was God", it means that the Word was only "a god". However, in reality, the word order in Greek is saying that the Word is DEITY, He is, His essential being is, God Himself.

**The Context:** As we read through the book of John, the context clarifies that in fact Jesus Christ really is God Himself.

By the way, take a look at Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created....". A bit similar to John 1:1, isn't it? When John wrote the Gospel of John, he undoubtedly intended the similarity.

All the above can be summarized in what is called

**The Golden Rule of Interpretation**

***When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense;***

***therefore,***

***take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning,***

***unless***

***the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.***

 **Vocabulary:**

**Axiom:** An axiom is an unprovable truth. It is a truth accepted for the sake of the discussion.

**Example:** If  $A = C$ , and  $B = C$ , then  $A = B$ . When two items are both equal to a third thing, then they must be equal to each other. I may not be able to actually prove that A is the same thing as B, but I can demonstrate that they must be equal by comparison to another thing.

**FOOTNOTES and CROSS REFERENCES**

Occasionally it appears that folks think that the footnotes and the cross references in their bibles are part of the inspired text. They are not.

Neither are the Chapter, Verse or paragraph divisions.

These references are inserted by the publisher, the translation committee or another person to help with Bible study.

When a cross reference sends you to some other verse, read the context of that verse carefully. It might be an incorrect cross reference.

**HOWEVER**, keep in mind that the writing of every part of the Scriptures was directed by the same God. The Bible is a coherent whole, so, often another passage in Scripture will shed light on what you are reading. Look for other passages that address the same topic which you have found and consider the over-all concept. Be careful, however, that you are actually comparing related passages.

The context may be different between two apparently similar passages.

**Here is an example:**

In Mark 6:33-44 we see Jesus feeding five thousand men (plus an unknown number of women and children) with five loaves and two fishes.

Uninformed skeptics have complained about errors in the Bible by noting that other passages state that there were four thousand.

Well, note that in Mark 8:1-9 He did indeed feed about four thousand people, This was with seven loaves and a few small fish.

Were these separate events? The context makes that clear, as do verse 1 and verses 14-21 of chapter 8.

## **CULTURAL IMPACT**

The Scriptures were written in cultures and lands extremely different to what we experience today. We tend to insert our perspectives.

Take, for example, the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. In one test with 100 subjects from various cultural backgrounds, only six noticed what caused the prodigal to return home.<sup>7</sup> What was it?

Take a look at v. 14. Do you see the regional famine?

In the test mentioned, all those who missed the famine were Americans!

In a later test with 50 Russians from St. Petersburg, forty two noticed the famine. Just 70 years before 670,000 Russians had died of famine during the Nazi German siege.

Consider Esau and Jacob in Genesis 25:27. "One of the ways that Jacob has been portrayed is as being "a mamma's boy" while *Esau* is the hero, *a skillful hunter*.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Fruchtenbaum points out that, in Genesis, "*a skillful hunter*" was actually a derogatory term.

As for Jacob, the term "*a peaceful man*" or "*a quiet man*" is a Hebrew term meaning "perfect", "upright", "whole", "complete", "blameless" or "without blemish."

Esau was seen as a self-centered man, driven by what he felt like doing, whereas Jacob was faithful to his family and the family business. Jacob was no wimp – he was a shepherd/rancher proficient at all the hard and sometimes dangerous work involved.

"*The most powerful cultural values are those that go without being said*". "When a passage of Scripture appears to leave out a piece of the puzzle because something went without being said, we instinctively fill in the gap with a piece from our own culture."<sup>7</sup>

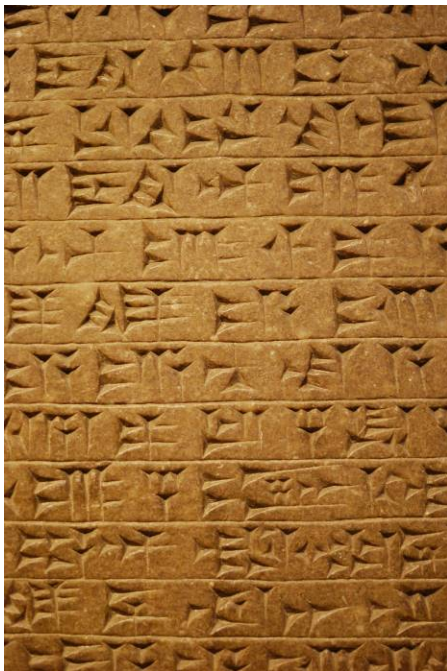
**SOURCE TEXTS:**

**THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES WERE VERY DIFFERENT FROM ENGLISH**

**WRITING STYLES: PUNCTUATION and CAPITALS**

Something to understand about the original languages is that they did not use punctuation or capital and lower case letters. In fact Hebrew did not even use any vowels (like a,e,i,o,u) for thousands of years. A lot of the writing in Bible languages did not even have any spacing between words, any sentence divisions or any paragraph divisions; no commas or no periods at all! Genesis was possibly based on ancient Cuneiform clay tablets that Moses had access to. Cuneiform was very different from our idea of a written language. The writing was done by poking soft clay with a pointed tool.

Here are some pictures of texts similar to the Bible Originals:



**Cuneiform tablet**



**Hebrew Bible Text**

British\_Museum\_Room\_10\_cuneiform.jpg  
 Creative Commons: British Museum, Assyrian collections (Room 10)

Creative Commons Image: Wellcome Library, London.  
 Hebrew\_manuscript\_B\_1\_Wellcome\_L0063630.jpg





First Century Koine Greek – John 1:1-15

Public Domain Image from Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository

**HEBREW AND ARAMAIC:**

The Old Testament originals were copied by extremely meticulous Jewish Scribes, who were very careful, then performed numerical checks of the words and letters. Every letter in Hebrew has a numeric value.

If they found a mistake, they did not correct it, they destroyed the copied manuscript!

When the Dead Sea scrolls were examined, it was found that these were about 1000 years older than the earliest documents that were previously known. In spite of that fact, the differences in wording were very small, mostly involving spelling and style.

## **GREEK:**

There are thousands of New Testament documents in existence. The earliest of these is a fragment of the book of John actually produced less than 100 years after Christ.

Comparing all of these have allowed us a very real confidence that what we now have is 99.5% faithful to the originals. There are over 20,000 lines of text, but only 40 lines, about 400 words, are in doubt. None of these change any significant doctrine.

Questions as to "which text" is the basis of a modern translation sometimes overlook the fact that we have access today to the extensive research described above. If you hear arguments regarding the use of the "Textus Receptus" versus the "Alexandrian Text" in modern translations, be advised that neither of these represent what we know about the New Testament text today. In spite of that, if all you had was one of those texts, no significant doctrine would be changed by either one.

**Note:** There are some who mistakenly think that the title "Textus Receptus" has some special meaning, such as an indication that the text was received from God. This is a gross misunderstanding. That Latin term was the common disclaimer used by the Elzvir family printing business in 1633. It meant that what they printed had not been changed from what the customer had given them.

The TR, as the Textus Receptus is known, was originally assembled in 1516 by a man called Erasmus in an admirable attempt to consolidate all the Greek biblical texts into one book. Unfortunately, he did not have all the biblical Greek manuscripts available, so he back-translated a few chapters from Latin and also introduced a few errors himself. Although this caused the text to contain errors, no major doctrine was affected.

The TR was the basis for Tyndale's English translation in 1525. The Authorized (KJV) translators from 1607 to 1610 copied Tyndale's translation word-for-word for over 90% of their New Testament. There were **no** copies of the Greek biblical text available in England until 1628.

## **SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF BIBLE TEXTS**

There is a science of studying ancient texts to determine how accurate and authentic they are. This science is called "**Textual Criticism**".

This is not a religious-based science and so can be considered un-biased as to whether or not the texts we have truly represent the original writings of the Bible. "It is the science of discovering error in texts and the art of removing it."<sup>13</sup>

Every time you correct a misprint, you exercise textual criticism.<sup>13</sup> As with many sciences, an element of judgment, or art, is involved.

**For instance**, if you see the word "centre" in a document, your background may say that the word is misspelled. However, if you are aware of British spellings, you will make a judgment that the word was spelled correctly for British readers,

but perhaps should be spelled "center" if the document is aimed at American readers.

Be careful about believing writers or websites that start out with a preconceived notion, authors that seem to "have a chip on their shoulder".

## **THE TRUTH AND THE FEAR OF "BEING WRONG"**

Marilyn vos Savant, a column writer for Parade Magazine has this to say about the fear of being wrong:

"Because people get freaked out at the notion of being wrong about anything. It makes them feel insecure. If you can be wrong about this or that, what about all the other stuff that you think you know? It's a bad feeling. And the more important the subject, the more unnerving the emotion. It's not too scary to be incorrect about a math concept, but how about the car you bought? Or the doctor you chose?"

"Your (her reader's) question goes to the heart of much unsound thinking. First, we develop beliefs throughout our childhood and teen years before we learn enough facts and have the experience to process them adequately.

"Then, after we leave school, we tend to head down one of two roads:

- 1) We close our minds to new or different information while becoming more and more sure of ourselves as we get older; or
- 2) we watch, listen, and continue to learn as we increase in wisdom. The second road has way more bumps and curves."<sup>14</sup>

Think about that. Do you really want to know the truth? Or are you afraid that you will be led astray?

Remember, our only anchor to truth is the Word of God. God has provided guidance to understanding His Word through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. We need to continually ask His help in understanding what He is telling us.

Be careful, though! Never interpret the Word through your experiences.

### **Consider the following:**

**John 8:30-32** – (Jesus, speaking to Jewish religious leaders): As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, **"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."**

**John 16:12-15** – "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. **But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth,** for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

"He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you.

"All things that the Father has are Mine, therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you."

**Acts 17:10-12** – The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. **Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.** Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.

We can confidently assume that God wants us to understand His Word.

We see from the Bereans that it is an honorable thing to question what we are taught by studying what the Scriptures themselves say.

By following the basic rules of reading the context, of comparing what is stated in other parts of the Word, and of not assuming that any one translation is perfect, we can be confident that God will help us discern the truth. Comparing various translations will help us understand obscure passages.

Also be confident that no significant doctrine is changed by any translated version of God's Word (with the exception of the intentionally skewed New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses).

## **COMPARISON OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS:**

There is a very great variety in the styles of Bible translation in English. Which one should I use?

**LITERAL:** At one end are the "translations" which try to remain word-for-word. These can not communicate the meaning of the Word in English, since we use language differently from the original languages of the Bible.

Perhaps the least useful is an interlinear version. That is because the English words next to the Greek or Hebrew words are actually from an existing translation. If the specific English words were placed next to the originals, the English would be virtually unreadable. It is also erroneous to interpret each original word as "one word = one meaning".

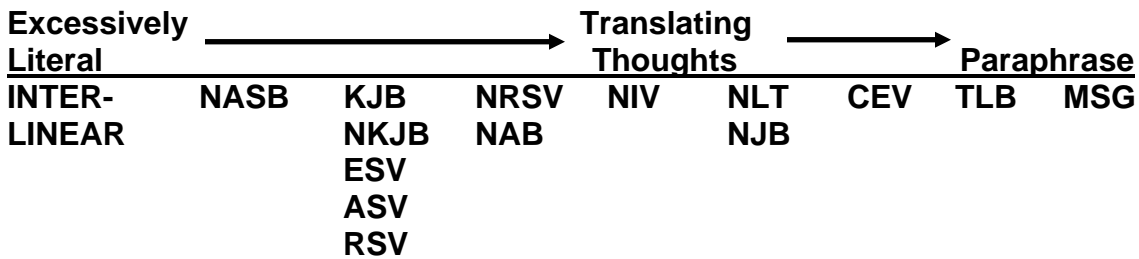
## **TRANSLATING THOUGHTS :**

The formal term here is "Dynamic Equivalence". This does help us understand in terms of our own culture, but is more open to erroneous interpretations by the translators.

## **PARAPHRASE:**

A paraphrase is basically a commentary. The "translation" may or may not be valid, depending on the perspective of the writer.

**Below is a chart to help choose which ones will be most helpful.**



- ASV**     **American Standard Version**  
(Updated KJB with good American English.)
- CEV**     **Contemporary English Version**
- ESV**     **English Standard Version**  
(Well balanced translation.)
- KJB**     **King James Bible ("Authorized Version")**  
(Archaic English language, but perhaps the highest example of the beauty of the English Language. Unfortunately its New Testament contains minor errors due to lack of an accurate Greek text.)
- MSG**     **The Message (Eugene Peterson)**  
(Strongly reflects Petersons' views.)
- NAB**     **New American Bible (Catholic)**
- NASB**    **New American Standard Bible**  
(Excellent study Bible, but not flowing English.)
- NIV**     **New International Version**  
(Much easier to read, but does show occasional translator bias.)
- NJB**     **New Jerusalem Bible (Catholic)**
- NKJB**    **NewKing James Bible**  
(Primarily a modern English update of the KJB)
- NLT**     **New Living Translation**  
(Cleaned up and easier to read version of the TLB.)
- NRSV**    **New Revised Standard Version**
- RSV**     **Revised Standard Version**  
(Basically an excellent 1946 language update to the KJB, but it does contain a few liberal doctrinal biases in the choice of wording.)
- TLB**     **The Living Bible (Kenneth Taylor)**  
(Intended for children, but highly influenced by Taylor's views. Includes significant thoughts that were not in the original Scriptural passages.)

## **FUTURE STUDY:**

There are numerous other facets of Bible Interpretation to pursue as you grow in your desire for knowledge.

Some of these are:

- ♦ **The Eight Covenants of the Bible**, and their influence on our understanding of God's work in history.
- ♦ **Types and Symbols in the Scriptures.**
- ♦ **Parables and Allegories.**
- ♦ **Prophecy.**

## NOTES AND RECOMMENDED READING

Scripture quotations used in this study are from the New American Standard Bible, Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.

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2. **"The Number of Textual Variants: An Evangelical Miscalculation"** by Daniel B. Wallace.  
<http://bible.org/article/number-textual-variants-evangelicalmiscalculation>
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<http://bible.org/article/majority-text-and-original-text-are-they-identical>
4. Pgs 61-63, **"Basic Bible Interpretation"** by Roy B. Zuck.
5. **"Basic Bible Interpretation"** by Roy B. Zuck.  
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6. **"Never Read a Bible Verse"** by Gregory Koukl.  
<http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5466>
7. **Misreading the Scripture with Western Eyes**, by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien
8. **Ariel's Bible Commentary *The Book of Genesis***, by Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum.
9. **"Methodical Bible Study"** by Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum.  
<http://arielc.org/mm5/merchant.mvc?> (mp3 or CD)
10. **"The Nature of the Bible"** a study by Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum.  
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<http://www.arielm.org/dcs/pdf/mbs030m.pdf>
11. **Stand to Reason** website (Greg Koukl): <http://www.str.org/>
12. **"The Journey From Texts to Translation, the Origin and Development of the Bible"** by Paul Wegener  
[http://www.amazon.com/Journey-Texts-Translations-Origin-Development/dp/0801027993/ref=sr\\_1\\_fkmr0\\_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1321074997&sr=8-3-fkmr0](http://www.amazon.com/Journey-Texts-Translations-Origin-Development/dp/0801027993/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1321074997&sr=8-3-fkmr0)

13. **"The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism"** by A.E. Housman, the *Proceedings of the Classical Association*, August 1921, Vol XVIII.  
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14. **Ask Marilyn - Sunday's Column** - November 13, 2011,  
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