

Reliable Bible Translation

- Principles -

Oftentimes, the question arises, “What is a good Bible translation?” Depending on who you ask, you get a different answer. Generally speaking, there are two groups. The first defends *Bible that is readable*. They mainly use the New International Version (NIV), Good News Translation (GNT), or New Living Translation (NLT). Another only wants a *reliable and faithful translation*. This Bible must be as close as possible to the original languages. At the same time, this translation should be readable. They chose the King James Version or the New King James Version. How is it possible that there are so many translations? One reason has to do with its translation principles.

Translation Principles

What are translation principles? This word sounds complex, but it is quite simple. A translation principle is the basis for choices that a translator makes. In other words, why does he make such choices while translating a word? What is determinative for him? In general, two translation principles exist: dynamic and formal equivalent. What a difficult word: equivalent. What does it mean? Simply said, how much an English word corresponds with its original word in Hebrew or Greek. If this is said differently, how much do you see the link between the word that has been translated in English and the Hebrew and Greek one? First, we will study the two translation methods.

Dynamic Translation

With a dynamic translation (equivalence), the translator wants the English reader *to understand the text as much as possible*. For him, it is mainly about getting the thought and meaning of the original text across. This, however, is at the expense of the faithfulness of its translation. An example will make this clear. First, I will show a translation that is close to the original text. Then one that is dynamically translated. When Adam sees his wife for the first time, he says: “**This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man**” (Gen. 2:23 KJV). This verse is not understood easily. You need time and should study to understand it. How would a dynamic translator phrase this? “**Adam said, ‘Now there is one who is human also, like me. I will call her woman, because she came forth from the man.’**” Some things are no longer visible in the translation. The reason is to make it more readable. What is a difference? In the Hebrew we find the following expression, “**This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh!**” This is phrased as, “**She is also a woman, like me.**” Is that clearer? Definitely. Nevertheless, it lost the power of the Hebrew text. What is another example? In Marah the waters became bitter. Israel was not able to drink it. In a text close to the original it says, “**And [Moses] cried unto the LORD; and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet**” (Ex. 15:25 KJV). How is it found in a dynamic translation? For instance, the New International Version translates, “**Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink**” (Ex. 15:25 NIV). The difference is found in the last part of the verse. Instead of “**the waters were made sweet**” it reads “**the water became fit to drink.**” Could it be translated this way? For the purpose of understanding, it could. However, the Bible writer demonstrates in the original languages a contrast between the name Marah, which means bitter, and the water that became sweet. This connection is lost in dynamic translations. Note that this word in other places in such translations is translated as sweet (for instance Ps. 55:14). Summarized, we can say that dynamic translation is “translated freely.” Nevertheless, this is not the only way of translating. What is another possibility? That is formal translation.

Formal Translation

With formal translation the purpose is *to retain as much as possible the original language in the translation*. Each word in Hebrew or Greek in the best way translated with an equivalent word in English. Sometimes we call this a “word-for-word” translation. The translator desires to retain as much as he can of the original word-order. He translates both expressions and wordplays as literal as he is able to. It is possible that a sentence is not directly clear in the target language in its meaning. However, the translator wants to be faithful to the text. The result is that this kind of translation is not always easily readable. Sometimes one needs to reread a sentence or to study it. The person translating desires to keep repetitive sentences or words (e.g. Gen. 2:2). What then are examples of Hebrew expressions? One which we recognize is that Jesus is the “king of kings” (Dan. 2:37). This is not really an English expression. The Hebrew meaning is “the highest king.” The issue is there is no other way of expressing it in Hebrew. This can only happen by expressions like “king of kings” or “holy of holies.” What is another example of a Hebrew way of speaking? For instance, God says to Adam that he may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When he would do this then “*dying* he shall die” (Gen. 2:17). This expression emphasizes the fact of dying. He will surely die when he eats. Certainly. No doubt about that. A third example is about retained repetitions, for example, “Jesus answered and *said* unto them...” (Mat. 21:24). We could argue that “said” after “answered” is unnecessary. Normally, we would not say this in English. A faithful translator will keep this in his translation, because it is found in the original.

At the same time we should understand that it is not always possible to do a translation word-for-word. That makes the text unreadable. Do you want to have an example? When Jesus speaks to His mother, He says, “*Woman, what have I to do with thee?*” (John 2:4 KJV). The Greek literally says, “What to me and to thee?” We would have a hard time to understand this. The translators of the King James Version have rightly translated it with a clear and understandable sentence. Summarized, formal translation means to translate the original language as literal as possible. This happens in a way that it is still readable in English.

Bibles and their Category

After it has been clear that there are generally two ways of translating, the question is: what translation belongs to which translation principle? First, we need to understand that within both principles there is *a whole range*. A translation can be dynamic, but still have a bit of formal character. Or the other way around, a translation could be formal but have grains of a dynamic translation. In the first place let us discuss the dynamic category. This translation principle is used in most modern Bibles. The least far going is the New International Version (NIV). Do you want to have an example? We find this in the first chapter of John, “*children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God*” (John 1:13 NIV).¹ Other translations belonging to this dynamic principle are: the New Living Translation (NLT), The Message (MSG), the Good News Bible (GNB), or Today’s English Version (TEV). A text from the NLT is, “*From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another*” (John 1:16). However, this absolutely differs from what the original language says, “*And from His fullness, have we all received, also grace upon grace.*” It is rather an interpretation of the text than a reliable translation. I would not advise anyone to use this translation for daily Bible reading.

The other group is formal translation. What Bibles do belong to this category? Of course our known and beloved *King James Version*. Sometimes called the Authorized Version. The translators did not want to add extra words. In such cases it is in *italics*. Other translations that belong to this category are the New American Standard Bible (NASB), which is extremely formal, and the New King James Version (NKJV), which is a bit more dynamic than the King James Version. The English Standard Version (ESV) would fit here as well, although it is on the dynamic side of formal translations.

¹ The original text says: “Which not of water, nor of the will of flesh, nor of the will of a man, but are born of God.”

However, choosing a good Bible translation does not only depend on translation principles. Another important area is the underlying text. What are the possible texts?

Underlying Text of Bible Translations

We have only translations of the Bible in English. For God caused the Bible authors to write their documents write in three different languages. The Old Testament is mainly written in Hebrew. A part is in Aramaic (mainly Daniel 2-4, Ezra 4-7 and some other verses). This language is quite close to Hebrew, but a bit different. The New Testament is written in Greek. Probably you are acquainted with these letters from school: alpha, beta, gamma. Some English words are even coming from Greek. Think of cardiologist. That is a specialist (logist) of the heart (cardio).

Received Text

We have to go back to the original languages to see the text of the Bible itself. The documents with the writing of these languages are called manuscripts. In other words, a manuscript is a paper(scroll) or parchment with the Greek or Hebrew text. We do no longer have the original documents of the Bible writers. However, there are many copies in available to us. There are sometimes (small) differences between all those copies. This is minimal for the Old Testament. The Jewish copyists carefully copied the text. They had a meticulous system for this.² However, for the New Testament we find more differences between the various copies. They were copied less accurately. This is still not too bad when we look at the 5000 copies that we have worldwide. Most of the times the verses in the manuscripts are similar. Only few verses or words are different, like the text, “**For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one**” (1 John 5:7 KJV). This group of manuscripts is called the Textus Receptus. This sounds quite difficult, but simply means Received Text. Why does it have this name? Because from the early Christian centuries the church has “received” this text as given from God and preserved by Him. He has taken care that the church has always had access to it and could rely on it.

Critical Text

However, in 1881, something changed in the field of Greek manuscripts. Two important professors B.F. Westcott and F.J.A Hort deliver a new Greek text. This is based on other manuscripts. They are glad to have these, because they loath the existing text. How is this new Greek text called? The Critical Text. Why? Because from this time onward, theologians look more critically to the Biblical text in the original languages to determine the ‘original text.’ What is the foundation for this new variant? Only two manuscripts: Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. Codex is another name for a manuscript. The first codex comes from the library of the Roman Catholic Church. The second is found in 1859 by Tischendorf in the Sint-Catherines monastery in the Sinai Peninsula. This manuscript contains, besides the New Testament, also the Old Testament in Greek and the Apocrypha. Do you know what is stunning about this finding? A part of the Old Testament lies in the trash bin.³ Nevertheless, both professors are exceedingly satisfied with the two manuscripts. Why? Their dates are more ancient than all the manuscripts of the Received Text. How old are they? It is assumed from the fourth century. The manuscripts of the Received Text, on the other hand, are the earliest from the tenth century. This is for them *the* reason to promote these ancient manuscripts.

What is the value of the Critical Text for modern Bible scientists? They argue that this text is quite important. These two old manuscripts have more value than the many existing copies. Why? Older for them equals more faithful. In their opinion, it is closer to the text that the Bible writers penned. There are fewer copies in between. Therefore, there should be less errors in them due to copying, and thus, more reliable. This is the reason that most *modern* Bible translations use the Critical Text as source for their New Testament. An exception is the New King James Version (and Herziene Statenvertaling in Dutch). This version uses the same original text as the King James Version. However, most

² The finding of the Dead Sea scrolls demonstrate that the Hebrew text has been carried over very precisely. See the website: <https://archeologieonline.nl/artikelen/de-dode-zeerollen-een-overzicht>

³ <http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/extras/tischendorf-sinaiticus.html>

universities use the Critical text as their foundation, even the Restored Reformed Seminary (HHS) and the Theological University of Apeldoorn (TUA). It is no longer about the Received Text. Exceptions are the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS) and the universities of the Free Church Continuing and of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

Differences between Critical and Received Text

What is the difference between the Critical Text and the Received Text? That is truly a wide range. In the first place, many verses not found in the first text, while existing in the latter. For instance, two longer paragraphs disappeared. The first is the pericope that the Lord Jesus does not condemn the woman taken in adultery and forgives her (John 7:53-8:11). The second is the appearance of Jesus in the gospel of Mark after His resurrection. In this passage, the Lord Jesus grants a number of promises for protection in danger. Even if they would step on snakes or drink any poison, nothing would happen (Mark 16:12-20). Besides larger parts, also a number of verses disappeared (e.g. Matt. 18:11, Mark 9:44, Acts 8:36).⁴ Other differences are found word changes in particular verses. Often this is related to the name or Divinity of the Lord Jesus. What could something like this be? One day Joseph and Mary stand in the temple before Simeon. In reliable Bibles is written, “*Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him*” (Luke 2:33 KJV). When you look at this verse in the Critical Text, it reads, “*His father and his mother marvelled at those things that were said of Him*” (Luke 2:33 CT). In the ancient manuscripts, the Bible writer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, confirms that Joseph is the father of Jesus. That looks like a different view about the divinity of the Savior. Thus, we have seen a number of differences between both texts.

Reliability of the Original Text

What should we think of the Critical Text and the Received Text? Which one is trustworthy? Are that the most ancient manuscripts found in the nineteenth century, or the five thousand copies that are available for centuries? Modern theologians will tell you the first. However, I am convinced of the that it is the Received Text. Why? For the following reasons.

The first one is that *the majority of copies of the Received Text is more reliable* than the *two* ancient manuscripts. Old does not equal more authentic. Let us imagine that we find Greek texts that are older than the current ancient texts. Nevertheless, these are written by Arians and testify against parts of the Bible. Are they, therefore, more reliable? Certainly not. Thus, the argument that older is better is incorrect. Also, a faithful text is in normal cases much more copied than a corrupt one. The Received Text has been copied many times, is spread through the whole world and was accepted by the ancient church. This argues for the cause that the origin of the 5000 manuscripts is more reliable than the two ancient manuscripts. Let us give the manuscripts of the Critical Text the benefit of the doubt, and that they are exceptional reliable. Why do we have no more copies of those manuscripts? Why was the one manuscript of the Vatican not used by Erasmus? He knew of it, but did not use it on purpose when he printed the Received Text. His argument? It was too much influenced by the Latin Vulgate.⁵

Another reason to argue for the Received Text is that there are *many differences between the manuscripts of the Critical Text* that are its basis. Even more, this foundation exists of two manuscripts only: Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. What is the problem? These two differ substantially from one another. We find at least 3036 differences.⁶ Just a ‘small’ side note: this number is only covering the *four gospels*. How many more discrepancies are then found in the rest of the New Testament? What is the result of these variations? Once in a while, a new edition of the Critical Text is printed. At this moment, the 28th edition is on the market since the first one of Westcott and Hort in 1881.⁷ You can count on differences in every edition. Between the first edition

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_New_Testament_verses_not_included_in_modern_English_translations

⁵ <https://textandcanon.org/the-changing-fortunes-of-codex-vaticanus/> en <https://confessionallbibliology.com/2016/05/16/erasmian-myths-codex-vaticanus/>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_codices_Sinaiticus_and_Vaticanus.

An example is Matthew 6:33 or John 1:34. “The chosen” in Sinaiticus and “the son” in Vaticanus.

⁷ This is the Nestle-Alland (NA28). <https://www.newtestamentgreek.net/nestle-aland28.html>

of the professors and the current one there are at least 695 changes. Sometimes even parts of sentences are altered!⁸ The question we should ask about such foundational texts is: can the Bible each time be changed? How reliable is it then? Therefore, the Critical Text is not a good foundation to represent Gods Word. The original text should namely be reliable and unchangeable. When it comes to the basis of the Received Text, we have to admit that there are differences between the many manuscripts. However, these alterations do not contradict each other, or are only minimal changes. For instance, the wordorder has been changed, or a word is spelled differently. Think of “Messiah” with a double “s” or Mesiah” with one “s” (John 4:25). Only at times we find are more considerable differences. One example is 1 John 5. This verse reads in one group of manuscripts “For there are three that bear witness on earth...” (Received Text), while it is not found in the Majority Text.⁹ Still we see that the Received Text has acceptable differences, even due to its many copies. That gives us a good and reliable foundation.

A final argument for the Critical Text is that it does not have errors, while *the Critical Text contains faults that are evident*. What kind of errors do we find in the Critical Text? In this article, I pointed already to the text that Joseph is called the father of Jesus (Luke 2:33). What else? In the gospel of John, the Lord Jesus is called the “only begotten God” (John 1:18). Most likely this originates from the doctrine of a sect in the second century.¹⁰ Fortunately most modern translators recognize that this is clearly wrong. For this reason they translate it away as “who is God Himself” (NBV), or “the only God” (ESV). Another fault is that the sun failed shining (Luke 23:45). Or the verse that it is always wrong to become angry (Matt. 5:22). This means that even a righteous anger is sinful. This does contradict the life of Jesus. He became furious when they sold animals on the temple court. How should this verse be read? In a faithful original text it says that only to become angry without cause is sin. One, therefore, may become righteous angry. Is not God the same when it comes to sin?¹¹ In the Received Text we do not find such errors. We can trust it. In conclusion, we have seen four reasons to reject the Critical Text and embrace the Received Text. The former is unreliable, while the latter, though its discrepancies between copies, can be trusted.

We have laid the basis to choose a good translation. In the second article, we are going to make a choice for a particular translation. This is based on two things: translation principle and the underlying text. What English translation will this be?

⁸ <https://www.bereanpatriot.com/majority-text-vs-critical-text-vs-textus-receptus-textual-criticism-101/> and <https://www.thetextofthegospels.com/2018/05/n-in-2018-and-w-h-in-1881-how-similar.html>

⁹ On this website, you can find all the differences between the Received Text, the Majority Text and the Alexandrian Text: <https://www.textusreceptusbibles.com/TRNTV/62/5>

¹⁰ This sect is called Gnosticism. <https://gnosticismexplained.org/jesus-christ-in-gnosticism/>

¹¹ Other errors are found in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 1:7-10. Asa is replaced with Asaph (vs. 7) and Amon is changed into Amos (vs. 10).