

From Davenport to Couch: Why Language Development Matters in Bible Translations

Steve Baney, PhD

Why are there different translations of the Bible?

The Bible was written by people who spoke and wrote in languages other than English. Unless you learn to read it in its original languages, then it must be translated in order for you to read it.

Language changes over time. My grandparents called it a *davenport*. My parents called it a *sofa*. I call it a *couch*. My kids might call it a *sectional* or a *settee* (rhymes with petty). One meaning communicated with five different English words. My grandparents use the word *ghost* to describe the spirit of a dead person haunting a house. My children use it as a verb to mean not showing up to a planned meeting, and giving no explanation. One word, two meanings. The word *save* can mean rescue, preserve, store, prevent waste, or reserve. Even the single word *love* can mean many different things (I love my wife. I love tacos).



Two approaches (called translation philosophy)

Word-for-word (formal)	Thought-for-thought (functional / dynamic)	Paraphrase (interpretation)
- keeps structure (Yoda-speak) and idioms	- communicates the same meaning, sometimes uses different words	- Not a translation, but someone's thoughts about the Bible - Can be helpful; not a Bible
- NASB, KJV, ESV, HCSB	- NLT, NIV	- MSG, CEV, TLB



The first time we successfully landed on the moon, the crew of the Apollo 11 space craft left a plaque on the surface of the moon. It reads (in part), “We came in peace for all mankind.” As you consider the meaning of this phrase, does it include all people or just men (not women)?

You see two restroom doors, each with a sign on it. One reads “MEN.” The other reads “WOMEN.” (Aside from the current issues related to gender identity and dysphoria), does the sign that reads “MEN” mean that the restroom is for the use of all people or just men (not women)?

Why does one (mankind) mean all people and the other (men) mean only men, not women? They both use forms of the word man.



When considering different translations of the Bible, people often ask and wonder:

Does literal equal accurate?

What would it mean to take the words of the Apollo 11 plaque *literally*? Would it still be *accurate*?

Let's consider one word from Psalm 1:1 by looking at a number of translations and paraphrases.

<p>“Blessed is the [one] who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers” (NIV)</p>	<p>“Oh, the joys of [those] who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers.” (NLT)</p>	<p>“How well God must like [you] — you don't walk in the ruts of those blind-as-bats, you don't stand with the good-for-nothings, you don't take your seat among the know-it-alls.” (MSG)</p>
<p>“Blessed is the [man] who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers” (ESV)</p>	<p>“Blessed is the [person] who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!” (NASB)</p>	<p>“God blesses [those people] who refuse evil advice and won't follow sinners or join in sneering at God.” (CEV)</p>
<p>“Blessed is the [man] that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.” (KJV)</p>	<p>“How happy is the [man] who does not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path of sinners or join a group of mockers!” (HCSB)</p>	<p>“God's blessings follow [you] and await you at every turn: when you don't follow the advice of those who delight in wicked schemes, When you avoid sin's highway, when judgment and sarcasm beckon you, but you refuse.” (The Voice)</p>

Break a leg! Don't beat around the bush. Bite the bullet. We use **idioms** like these far more often than we realize. So do people who speak other languages, including those who God inspired to write the Bible. Have you heard these phrases?...

- gird up your loins
- drop in the bucket
- bite the bullet
- the writing on the wall
- cast the first stone
- eye for an eye
- go the extra mile
- the straight and narrow
- wash your hands of something
- Wolf in sheep's clothing

These are just a sample of the idioms that come from the Bible. But if you don't know what an idiom means, then you think cats and dogs are actually falling down out of the

clouds like rain. What happens to Bible translations if the translators don't know the meaning of an idiom?

How would you define the word PREVENT?

Most say "to stop something from happening." Based on this definition, how would you understand the words of Psalm 119:147? It reads, "I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word."

In another translation, the same line reads, "I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word." Considering the words you use (your definitions, your vocabulary, your meaning), which of the two translations above makes better sense to you?

A frequent question: **Which translation is best?**

I always answer this question the same way: Read the translation that uses your language, your words, your vocabulary. If it isn't in your language and your vocabulary, then it isn't *your* Bible. It's not necessarily bad. It's just not yours.

— — —
Steve Baney, PhD, is a missiologist, ordained pastor, and author in northwest Ohio.
<http://www.pastorstevebaney.com/>