

VERBAL, PLENARY INSPIRATION, AND BIBLE TRANSLATION METHOD: IS THERE AN ENTAILMENT?

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1. Aims, Clarifications, and Disclaimers

THE CLAIM THAT VERBAL, plenary inspiration entails the inherent superiority of an “essentially literal” translation philosophy or methodology has already been contested indirectly, as part of larger works on the topic of (primarily English) Bible translation, as well as directly.¹ This article aims to build on these works by bringing in additional lines of argumentation and evidence (scriptural, linguistic, and historical).

1. See D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation—And Other Limits, Too,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Both (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 65–113; Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007); Dave Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013); Mark L. Strauss, “Do Literal Bible Versions Show Greater Respect for Plenary Inspiration? (A Response to Wayne Grudem),” presented at the ETS Annual Meeting, Valley Forge, PA (November 16, 2005); Rodney J. Decker, “Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 11 (2006): 25–61. Cf. also Doug Moo’s comments in his paper presented at the NIV 50th Anniversary dinner and reception: “To suggest in our discussion of translations among a general audience that ‘word-for-word’ is a virtue is to mislead people about the nature of language and translation. At the same time, the fact that translations transfer meaning, not words, makes clear that it is foolish to claim that the doctrine of inspiration entails a ‘word-for-word’ translation approach. Such a claim effectively removes the inspiration from those many words and forms that cannot be carried over—try producing a ‘word’ equivalent of the preposition *eis* when it governs an infinitive!” (Douglas J. Moo, *We Still Don’t Get It: Evangelicals and Bible Translation Fifty Years After James Barr* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014], 10). Bill Mounce has also recently written on the relationship between the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures and translation theory (“Do Formal Equivalent Translations Reflect a Higher View of Plenary, Verbal Inspiration?” *Themelios* 44.3 [2019]: 477–86). His approach, however, is to deny (any meaningful expression of) verbal inspiration. He denies that “God controlled every word choice that was made” or that “God chose every word” (480–81). This certainly would weaken any entailment between inspiration and

This study is not intended to be a defense of all functional equivalence translations, some of which sometimes employ functional equivalence without giving sufficient consideration to the limits of that translation method.² Instead, this study aims to respond to the error of the claim, supported by some proponents of “essentially literal” translations, that the biblical doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration entails the inherent superiority of “essentially literal” translations over functional equivalence translations. As one who subscribes to a historical and robust statement of the inspiration of the Scriptures (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1), I find it troubling that others try to force a false entailment between this biblical doctrine and a particular translation theory. To quote Don Carson: “appeal to loyalty and faithfulness toward the Word of God as the ground for preserving formal equivalence is both ignorant and manipulative.”³

This article critiques some ideas of men involved in the translation of the ESV, and critiques some translation principles claimed to be followed by the ESV. However, this is not meant as a general critique of the ESV itself, which I consider to be a good translation (my favorite of the “essentially literal”)—in part because its real translation range is not limited to its ideal translation range.⁴ That the ESV (and other translations), in practice, is not always “essentially literal” is acknowledged even by Wayne Grudem: “every essentially literal translation has some amount of ‘paraphrase’ where a woodenly literal translation would be nearly incomprehensible to modern readers and would hinder communication rather than helping it.”⁵

The problem with the claims of men like Leland Ryken and Wayne Grudem is not that they are defending and promoting “essentially literal” translations (primarily the ESV, with which they were variously involved), which are good translations for many uses, but that they are misunderstanding, misrepresenting, and demeaning other good translations (including the NIV). When I use English translations, I use translations like the ESV and translations like the NIV or NLT, depending on my purpose and the occasion. This varied use of translations is based on a distinction of what might be called *inherent* superiority from what might be called *occasional* or

“essentially literal” translation (as he himself notes: “The implication of all this to our current topic is that if God did not dictate every word to the biblical authors, then it lessens the argument that every word must be explicitly translated” [481]), but represents a departure from the biblical teaching about the nature of the Scriptures, and is therefore to be repudiated. In response, see Dane Ortlund, “On Words, Meaning, Inspiration, and Translation: A Brief Response to Bill Mounce,” *Themelios* 45.1 (2020): 98–107.

2. Cf. the critiques offered by D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence.”

3. *Ibid.*, 85.

4. Cf. Dave Brunn’s insightful discussion of this distinction in *One Bible, Many Versions*, 61–70.

5. Wayne Grudem, “Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed out by God? Why Plenary Inspiration Favors ‘Essentially Literal’ Bible Translation,” in *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation*, Wayne Grudem, C. John Collins, Vern Sheridan Poythress, Leland Ryken, Bruce Winter (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 23.

functional superiority.⁶ To claim that a particular translation is better than others for a specific purpose or more suitable on a particular occasion is quite different than claiming that a translation is better than others inherently (as Grudem and Ryken do), and thus for any purpose or occasion.⁷

Claiming the inherent superiority of “essentially literal” translations is a problem in its own right. Still, the problem is exacerbated when works that propagate this misleading claim are publically promoted (at least through book endorsements) by (otherwise, rightly) popular and influential evangelical figures.

For example, in his endorsement of the book, Joel Belz states that Ryken’s *The Word of God in English* is “my most important read of the century—or, for that matter, of the millennium . . . I predict you will never again be satisfied with a translation of the Bible that is even mildly ‘dynamic.’”⁸ To raise this book above dozens of more meaningful and useful books (regardless of how we construe the referents of “the century” and “the millennium”) and to predict that readers will never again be satisfied with translations like the NIV (and more dynamic) is—at best—unhelpful to the cause of the gospel.⁹

A concern I have about the reception of the present article is that some of its readers will conclude that I do not affirm the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures (despite my clear statements to the contrary).¹⁰ Such a conclusion would be

6. Carson comments: “Translations have various strengths and weaknesses; further, they serve various constituencies. Clearly, there are ‘better’ and ‘worse’ translations according to a particular set of criteria” (“The Limits of Functional Equivalence,” 77).

7. Ryken’s estimation of the inherent superiority of “essentially literal” translations is clear: only the “essentially literal” translations are the unadulterated “Word of God”; other translations are “a mixture of God’s Word with human commentary and interpretation” (*Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009], 194). Grudem claims he cannot teach a theology or ethics class, cannot preach, cannot teach an adult Sunday school class, and cannot lead a fellowship group from a non-“essentially literal” translation. He considers these translations to be like commentaries, “not thinking of them as exactly the Word of God” (“Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed out by God,” 49–50). Much more helpful is Poythress’ perspective: “The translation is still the word of God, because it does express the meaning of the original, even if not every last ounce” (“Bible Translations for Muslim Readers,” *Missions Frontiers* [February 07, 2011]).

8. Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), third page of endorsements.

9. In my opinion, Decker (“What Does a Translator Have to Offer the Reader? A Response to Dr. C. John Collins ‘What the Reader Wants and the Translator Can Give: 1 John as a Test Case,’” presented at the Northeast Region ETS Conference on 1 April, 2006) provides a more accurate evaluation when he states that Ryken’s *The Word of God in English* is “perhaps the single most counterproductive publication to come from Crossway after [temporally following] the publication of the ESV.” Indeed, Ryken’s books on Bible translation (*The Word of God in English* and *Understanding English Bible Translation*) are the kind of books that deserve full length rebuttals.

10. For example, Ryken concludes that functional equivalence translations belie their translators’ implicit denial of verbal, plenary inspiration, the translators’ claims to the contrary notwithstanding (*The Word of God in English*, 217–18). While Ryken’s claim remains false, Mounce’s recent denial of verbal inspiration (“Do Formal Equivalent Translations Reflect a

false; I wholeheartedly affirm classic, robust, biblically faithful statements on the inspiration of the Scriptures, such as chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) or the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978).¹¹ The Bible is “the Word of God written” and is “given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life” (WCF 1.2).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: In section two, I identify the central two claims of Grudem and Ryken with which I take issue and provide quotations illustrative of these claims. Section three is the heart of the article, where I outline and argue for the primary reasons I find Grudem’s and Ryken’s claims to be false. I end the article with some reflections on the limits of what any one translation can do.

The terminology of translation theory is often convoluted. I assume the reader has some familiarity with the terminology as well as the range with which some terminology is used. In reference to the two main camps of thought on translation methodology found in discussions related to English Bible translation,¹² I prefer the terms “functional equivalence” and “formal equivalence” since these form a contrasting pair.¹³ However, since I am primarily responding to arguments made by

Higher View of Plenary, Verbal Inspiration?”) does not help the cause of those who maintain the biblical doctrine of verbal inspiration and also avoid the mistaken entailment made by Ryken and Grudem.

11. Though relatively recent in the history of the church, these statements go back, in content, if not always in wording, to early statements such as those of Clement of Rome (*1 Clement* 45: “Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit [τὰς ἀληθεῖς τὰς διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ ἁγίου]. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character [οὐδὲν ἄδικον οὐδὲ παραπλεποιημένον] is written in them.” *1 Clement* 47: “Truly, under the inspiration of the Spirit [πνευματιῶς], he wrote to you concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos.”) or Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 2.28.2 “The Scriptures are perfect [*perfectae sunt*] inasmuch as they were uttered by the word of God or His Spirit.”) or Augustin (*Letter* 82.3, to Jerome: “I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.”). Of course, these Church fathers are only—yet, crucially—echoing the Bible’s own view of itself as inspired and inerrant (e.g., Mark 12:36, 2 Tim. 3:16–17; Heb. 1:1–2; 2 Pet. 1:20–21; etc.).

12. As Strauss rightly points out, Relevance Theory has had “little impact” on the binary distinction between “formal” and “functional” equivalence that prevails in discussions of English Bible translation (“Bible Translation and the Myth of ‘Literal Accuracy,’” *Review and Expositor* 108.2 [2011]: 172).

13. Interestingly, the goal of translation, as identified by either side, gives primacy to meaning over form. Thus the goal of “essentially literal” translation is to be “as literal as possible” (ESV preface; this slogan is often expanded with “but as free as necessary”). As Strauss points out, “even this statement correctly gives veto power to meaning over form” (“Bible Translation,” 175), in that it admits that “literal” translation is not always “possible” and that (in the fuller form of the statement) it is sometimes “necessary” to translate freely. The task of the translator, according to functional equivalence translation proponents such as Strauss, is: “Translate the meaning; follow the form *when it promotes this goal*” (“Form, Function, and the ‘Literal Meaning’ Fallacy in Bible Translation,” *The Bible Translator* 56.3 [2005]: 158; emphasis his). Both statements rightly give primacy to meaning, but only the functional equivalence goal of

Ryken and Grudem in this article, I have retained their preferred term “essentially literal” in lieu of “formal equivalence” to avoid confusion.¹⁴

2. Claims of Grudem and Ryken and Their Implications

My concern with translation is not primarily with translation into English but with translating the Scriptures into other languages around the world. So why interact with Grudem and Ryken, who deal exclusively with English Bible translation?¹⁵ I find their claims relevant to my concerns because their claims are primarily principial (rather than language-specific) in nature and so applicable to Bible translation in any language. This universal application of principial Bible translation standards is implicitly recognized by Brunn and Carson. They bring to their discussions the balance of more extensive data and experience in other languages.¹⁶

Below I outline the two claims of Grudem and Ryken with which I take issue in this article. The second is the claim I am primarily concerned with, but the first is related and (at least in Grudem’s and Ryken’s minds) supports the second.

2.1. *The Scriptures focus on the “word” level of language*

Ryken claims that “the testimony of the Bible itself gives priority to the very *words* of the Bible, not to the thoughts.”¹⁷ This false dichotomy between the “very words” and the “thoughts” expressed by those words is echoed by Grudem as well: “But does ‘all Scripture’ mean the individual words themselves, or only the thoughts or ideas expressed by those words? Several texts of Scripture actually place emphasis on the individual words themselves.”¹⁸ While it is true that “the Bible repeatedly claims that every one of its words (in the original languages) is a word spoken to us by God, and is therefore of utmost importance,”¹⁹ this does not mean that the Bible has a focus on its “words” to the exclusion or even diminishment of higher levels of language representing “thoughts.” I appreciate Ryken and Grudem’s concern to maintain the biblical doctrine of inspiration (as opposed, for example, to Mounce). Still, the true application of this doctrine extends both above the word level (to the phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs) and below the word level (to grammatical number, tense forms,

translation rightly highlights this primacy (the “essentially literal” statement admits the primacy of meaning, but puts the accent on form).

14. I have not, however, generally retained the term “dynamic equivalence,” since, for some time, this has not been the term used by proponents of idiomatic or “functional equivalence” translation. Decker’s more extended discussion of terminology will be helpful for any readers not already familiar with the relevant terms (“Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation,” 26–40). Cf. also Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions*, 129–32.

15. See, for example, the claims of Ryken in *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 14, 65.

16. Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions*; Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence.”

17. *The Word of God in English*, 132.

18. “Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed out by God,” 26.

19. *Ibid.*, 19.

and so forth). A thoughtful application of the inspiration of Scripture to translation theory must take this range into account.

2.2. *Verbal, plenary inspiration favors an “essentially literal” or “word-for-word” translation method*

Grudem is clear on what he sees as the link between inspiration and translation: “this fact [that every word of Scripture is spoken by God] provides a strong argument in favor of ‘essentially literal’ (or ‘word-for-word’) translation as opposed to ‘dynamic equivalent’ (or ‘thought-for-thought’) translation.”²⁰ This connection is equally clear to Ryken: “The application of the doctrine of verbal inspiration to Bible translation should be obvious: If words rather than just the thoughts of the Bible are inspired by God, it is the words that a translation should reproduce.”²¹ In fact:

Translating the words of the original takes seriously the doctrines of verbal inspiration and plenary inspiration, whereas ‘though for thought’ translators, no matter how reverential they are toward the Bible, operate as though they did not believe that *the very words themselves* are inspired by God and therefore something to be retained in translation.²²

This is not the only place Ryken mischaracterizes modern translators. Elsewhere he presents them as modern “counterparts to medieval Roman Catholic priests” and says that modern readers are “just as surely removed from the words of the text as the medieval Christian was [under the Catholic suppression of lay access to the Scriptures].”²³ Yet, he also claims (ironically echoing the Roman Catholic priest Desiderius Erasmus)²⁴ that “Totally transparent passages are the exception rather than

20. Ibid.

21. *The Word of God in English*, 133. Ortlund, though a strong supporter of the ESV and of “essentially literal” (or “maximally transparent”) translation as the best translation method, avoids Ryken’s and Grudem’s mistaken entailment: “There is not a one-to-one correspondence between verbal inspiration and any particular translation theory” (“On Words, Meaning, Inspiration, and Translation,” 106). He also notes: “I have no trouble affirming that those men and women I know personally [excluding Bill Mounce] who serve on translation committees for functional equivalent translations have as high a view of plenary, verbal inspiration as anyone I know” (ibid.).

22. Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 217–18.

23. Ibid., 78.

24. Erasmus’s weak view of the clarity of Scripture provoked a stern response from Luther in his *De Servo Arbitrio* (*The Bondage of the Will*, trans. James I. Packer and O. R. Johnston [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1957], especially sections II.i, ii, vi; III.iv, v). Luther writes that, in the “kingdom” of the Pope, “nothing is more commonly said or more widely accepted than this dictum: ‘the Scriptures are obscure and equivocal; we must seek the interpreting Spirit from the apostolic see of Rome!’” (*The Bondage of the Will*, 124).

the rule in the Bible,” suggesting that, even with a “transparent translation,” the reader may still need a “priesthood” of interpreters.²⁵

In fact, despite his rightful defense of verbal, plenary inspiration, it is not entirely clear that Ryken correctly understands this doctrine; at least a few times, he writes of “verbal or plenary” inspiration as if “verbal” and “plenary” were different ways of saying the same thing, whereas each addresses a particular possible misunderstanding of inspiration (“verbal”: the misunderstanding that the very wording of Scripture was not inspired; “plenary”: the misunderstanding that the Scripture’s authority is limited in scope, such as to salvific issues).²⁶

3. Why Verbal, Plenary Inspiration Does Not Entail the Superiority of “Essentially Literal” Translations

In this section, I aim to demonstrate that, for reasons scriptural (theological), linguistic, and historical, the argument that verbal, plenary inspiration entails “essentially literal” translation is untenable. This argument:

3.1. *Is not in line with how the Bible talks about itself and is not consistent in emphasis with a thorough application of inspiration at all levels of language*

Grudem claims, “Our views about the proper goal of a Bible translation should be determined primarily by the teachings of the Bible about its own character and the nature of its words.”²⁷ Indeed, I agree that the Scriptures’ own view of themselves must determine our approach to the Scriptures and their translation.

However, in this section, I argue: (1) When the Bible speaks of its “words,” it often doesn’t mean only what Grudem and Ryken mean by “word.” (2) In any case, the emphasis of the Bible is no more on the inspiration of the words (as such) than on the inspiration of any other level of language. (3) If the logic Grudem and Ryken apply to “words” were applied to other levels of language, which are likewise inspired, we would end up with foolish translation errors (e.g., translating etymologies).

3.1.1. What is a word?

It quickly becomes apparent that biblical uses of the words “word” (דבר, λόγος, ῥῆμα and the like) often go beyond the normal semantic range of the English “word.” The

25. *The Word of God in English*, 70. For an excellent presentation of the biblical doctrine of the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture (*claritas scripturae*), see Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). See also Carson’s discussion of the clarity of Scripture related to translation (“The Limits of Functional Equivalence,” 76–78).

26. *The Word of God in English*, 127, 131 bis; *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 193. Article VI of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy affirms that “the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration” (italics added).

27. “Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed out by God,” 55.

Ten Commandments are “ten words” (Ex. 34:28; עֲשׂוּרַת הַדְּבָרִים); recognizing that the Ten Commandments are ten commandments, not ten words (in the English sense “word”), the ESV renders this designation as “Ten Commandments.” The whole law, it turns out, is fulfilled in one “word” (λόγος) consisting of six Greek words (Gal. 5:14)—seven English words in the ESV. Each “faithful word” in Paul’s epistles to Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8) is comprised of multiple Greek words. Obviously, λόγος in these cases has roughly the sense of the English words “saying” or “statement” (thus, the NIV and ESV rightly translate these instances as “trustworthy saying”). Furthermore, we are to let the “word of Christ” dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16), meaning his whole message, all his teaching, as transmitted and fleshed out through the Scriptural writings of the NT authors.

3.1.2. What, exactly, is inspired?

The continual refrain of Ryken and Grudem is “every word” and the “very words.” For example, Grudem notes, “the Bible repeatedly claims that every one of its words (in the original languages) is a word spoken to us by God, and is therefore of utmost importance.”²⁸ Their emphasis is that “every word” of Scripture comes from God and is, therefore, inspired and that, (crucially) therefore, the “very words” of Scripture are to be preserved in translation.²⁹ That “every word” of Scripture (as a “word,” in the English sense, in distinction from other levels of language) comes from God (is “God-breathed” or “inspired”) is undoubtedly a biblical teaching (cf. Deut. 8:3; Prov. 30:5) but is less clearly a biblical emphasis.

The accent in the main text on the inspiration of the Bible falls on the comprehensive nature of inspiration (all of Scripture, in all that it says, at all levels of language, including the word level), not on a merely word-centric notion of inspiration: *πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος* “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16).

This emphasis on Scripture as a whole is maintained when, immediately following the basic assertion that “all Scripture is God-breathed,” in the same sentence, Scripture is further described as *ὠφέλιμος* “beneficial, profitable, useful.” It is Scripture as a whole, at every level of language, that is profitable; the emphasis here is not primarily on (but does not exclude) the word level. Any given word, taken by itself, apart from its phrase, clause, sentence, or paragraph, is less profitable than when understood as part of a higher level of language.

When we expand our examination beyond 2 Timothy 3:16, we find that the Scriptures variously address the divine inspiration, source, authority, or preservation of different levels of Scripture. Sometimes it is “all Scripture” (2 Tim. 3:16, referring primarily to the OT, but also applicable to Paul’s letters and the rest of the NT: cf. 1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Pet. 3:15–16), at other times it is the whole law or the Pentateuch (Ps.

28. *Ibid.*, 19.

29. Brunn is surely correct in pointing out that “[English-speaking Christians’] tendency to focus on the word level seems to reflect our English bias” and that “if our native tongue had been a language like Simbari (with commonly used words [often representing what is equivalent to a clause in English] up to forty-six letters long), there would not be nearly as much discussion about the word level” (*One Bible, Many Versions*, 184–85).

19:7–11), sometimes the “word” (Josh. 21:45 [cf. ESV]; 23:14; 1 Kings 8:56; Prov. 30:5–6; Col. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19—but not always in the sense of “word” in English). To Ryken, apparently unaware of the morphemic level, the word-level is the most basic: “The most basic of all forms through which meaning is conveyed is surely *words*.”³⁰ In fact, the NT authors insist on the authority of even morphological features (below the word level)³¹ such as tense-form (John 8:58—aorist vs. present) and number (Gal. 3:16—singular vs. plural), or even aspects of the smallest letters and orthographic details (ἰῶτα, likely referring to the Hebrew letter *yod*, and κεφαλαία, a projection or “serif” of a Hebrew letter)³² of the Hebrew alphabet (Matt. 5:18).³³ The autographs of the Scriptures were inspired at all of these levels. Even the word order of the autographs is inspired.³⁴ However, word order isn’t as crucial for signalling syntactic relations in highly inflectional languages like Greek as it is in English (but does seem to accomplish various discourse roles).³⁵

3.1.3. Translating etymologically?

Ryken proclaims: “The very *forms* of biblical writing are inspired, and to the fullest extent possible the forms of the original need to be carried into the syntax and structure of the receptor language.”³⁶ While the first part of this statement is correct, the second part does not follow logically and is not the practice of any good translation.

That the very forms of the words of Scripture were inspired is evident from how NT authors depend on features such as number (Gal. 3:16) and tense-form (John 8:58) to make their points. Nevertheless, to translate into natural English, we regularly drop

30. *The Word of God in English*, 217; italics Ryken’s.

31. Morphemes are not necessarily below the word level (without yet distinguishing phonological from grammatical words), but can be and often are. In Greek, for example, some words are monomorphemic (such as the vast majority of prepositions or adverbs), but several major syntactic classes (namely, verbs, nouns, adjectives, participles, pronouns) are overwhelmingly or always polymorphemic. Polymorphemic words are particularly prevalent in inflectional/conjugating languages like Greek (and, to a lesser degree, Hebrew).

32. See, for example, the discussion in Samuel Tobias Lachs, “Some Textual Observations on the Sermon on the Mount,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 69.2 (1978): 106–108; cf. also Étienne Nodet, “Pas un *yod*, pas un *waw* (Mt 5,18),” *Revue Biblique* 117.4 (2010): 614–16.

33. As Brunn puts it: “Divine inspiration reaches below the word level to include prefixes, suffixes, and every subtle nuance of the original Scriptures” (*One Bible, Many Versions*, 184). It should be pointed out that, in Matthew 5:18, ἰῶτα and κεφαλαία are probably used figuratively to refer together to “the least of these commands” (v. 19).

34. The inspiration even of word order in the Scriptures is recognized by Jerome. Unfortunately, he lets this lead him away from his normal rule of translation: “For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the Holy Scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word” (*Letter 57.5*).

35. Cf. Steven Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010); Stephen Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek* (Dallas: SIL International, 2000).

36. *The Word of God in English*, 130.

the Hebrew/Greek 2nd person singular/plural number distinction, and we often obscure stylistic and discourse features or aspectual distinctions in the original by translating two or more tense-forms with the same English tense (e.g., Greek aorists, perfects, and “historical” presents with the English simple past tense). These changes are not made because of unfaithfulness on the part of the translators of functional equivalence versions; these changes are made by all English Bible translators because of the nature of the English language and are recognized as appropriate translation methodology, despite the God-breathed nature of the features that are changed or dropped.

It is clear that the meaning of some aspects of language can’t always be directly “transferred” to an equivalent element in another language. Thus, even from Greek to English, two Indo-European languages, it seems increasingly clear that English tenses do not precisely match up with aspectual values “coded” by Greek tense-forms but give as close an equivalent meaning as possible in English, given the linguistic categories of English.³⁷

The kind of reasoning that would impose strict adherence to the forms of words when translating between two (even related) languages has long been recognized for the linguistic and translational nonsense it is. Thus, Jerome condemns Aquila (the second century AD translator of the Hebrew OT into Greek) for translating not only “word-for-word,” but etymologically, syllable by syllable and letter by letter: “On the other hand we do right to reject Aquila, the proselyte and controversial translator, who has striven to translate not words only but their etymologies as well . . . he must with an unhappy pedantry translate syllable by syllable and letter by letter” (*Letter* 57.11, to Pammachius).³⁸ But precisely this syllabic and letter-bound pedantry follows from the logic of Grudem and Ryken.

3.2. *Does not reflect a linguistically mature understanding of the complexity of language(s) and translation*

Idioms and figures of speech are useful points at which to test translation theories. Given the nature of idioms as generally non-compositional (their meaning is not derived from their component parts), even staunch proponents of “essentially literal” or “word-for-word” translation must acknowledge the primacy of meaning over form in these cases.³⁹ This is illustrated in passages such as 1 Samuel 18:26, where the ESV

37. For example, see the following works by Constantine Campbell: *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative: Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Greek, volume 13 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007); *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). Cf. also Stanley Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*, Studies in Biblical Greek, volume 1; 3rd edition (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003); Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

38. Ironically, Ortlund (“On Words, Meaning, Inspiration, and Translation,” 101) sees Aquila as an example of “maximally transparent” translation (Ortlund’s preferred translation method), helpfully clearing away “the fog” of translation.

39. Fortunately, most translators who espouse an “essentially literal” translation method demonstrate through their work that they realize the limitations of the method and that a more idiomatic approach must often be adopted. Proponents of a functional equivalence approach

translates the Hebrew וַיֵּשֶׁר הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי דָוִד (woodenly: “and the matter was straight in the eyes of David”) with the functional equivalent “it pleased David well” (cf. NIV, NASB, CSB translate similarly).

When Abigail convinces David not to destroy Nabal, he notes that, without her intervention, the destruction of Nabal’s men would have been total (1 Sam. 25:34). In the ESV, the Hebrew מִשְׁתֵּיִן בְּקִיר (woodenly: “one who pees against the wall”—an idiom still readily understandable in certain parts of the world) is changed to “male” (cf. NIV, NASB) to give the sense in English (and perhaps also to make the expression “suitable” for the Bible, unlike the KJV’s “any that pisseth against the wall”).

Or again, when the spies sent by the teachers of the law and the chief priests flatter Jesus by saying οὐ λαμβάνεις πρόσωπον (woodenly: “you do not receive a face”; Luke 20:21), the translators of the ESV, like those of the NIV, recognize that this is most accurately rendered by the English “you show no partiality” (or something similar), without any reference to faces.⁴⁰

In Galatians 1:15, Paul is defending his apostolic credentials and highlights the primacy of the plan of God in calling him. God had set Paul apart ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου (woodenly: “from the womb of my mother”). The translators of the ESV, recognizing that the time of the “setting apart,” and not the location, is Paul’s point, felt free to render this as “before I was born” (the NIV gives the “essentially literal” rendering “from my mother’s womb”). Here again, the translators of the “essentially literal” ESV felt that abandoning Paul’s “very words” was acceptable to try to convey the meaning of those words in context accurately. This hardly means that they didn’t consider the words ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου to be inspired; rather, their correctly high view of the Word of God leads them to try to accurately convey the meaning of God’s (Greek) words into (functionally equivalent) English.

First Thessalonians 4:4 is a notoriously difficult verse to translate. However, one might expect that translations that share an “essentially literal” approach, translating the “very words,” should arrive at roughly the same result,⁴¹ rendering the Greek words with the equivalent English words. In delineating God’s will for his people, Paul says that each one should know τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκευῶς κτᾶσθαι (woodenly: “to hold/possess his own vessel”). The KJV and NASB give the “essentially literal” (and essentially unintelligible) rendering “to possess his vessel.” The RSV takes a stab at something intelligible with “to take a wife for himself.” The ESV also takes an idiomatic approach, offering “to control his own body” (so also NIV, CSB), interpreting κτᾶσθαι to mean “control” in this context and σκευῶς to mean “body.” Once again, the skilled and competent translators of these versions prioritize meaning over strict adherence to form, knowing that the latter is not the vocation of a translator.

should likewise recognize the limitations of that method and be prudent in its application. Carson (“The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation”) is essential reading on this matter.

40. This could be added to Grudem’s list of “Lost Faces,” places where functional equivalence translations have “eliminated” references to “faces” in the Greek with idiomatic English renderings (“Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed out by God,” 41–42).

41. Or what Ryken would call a “stable text” (see his chapter 11, “Destabilization of the Biblical Text” in *The Word of God in English*).

Another point where all translations belie a prioritization of meaning over form is in the translation of expressions governed by collocational restrictions. In such expressions, fixed associations between verb and noun pairs (or other combinations) preclude using other verbs (or other words) in the receptor language, regardless of the verb used in the source language.

Thus, where in Greek the generic verb ποιέω can be used in many expressions, English does not usually use the formally equivalent glosses “do” or “make” in these same instances. Instead, the proper translation of these expressions is governed by the collocational restrictions of English, as illustrated in the list below.⁴²

Greek	English (ESV)
ποιήσατε καρπὸν	bear fruit (Matt. 3:8)
τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν ποιεῖν	practicing your righteousness (Matt. 6:1)
ὃστις ἐποίησεν γάμους	who gave a wedding feast (Matt. 22:2)
ποιῶ τὸ πάσχα	I will keep the Passover (Matt. 26:18)
ἐποίησεν δώδεκα	he appointed twelve (Mark 3:14)
οἵτινες φόνον πεποιήκεισαν	who had committed murder (Mark 15:7)
ποιῆσαι ἔλεος	to show mercy (Luke 1:72)
κρίσιν ποιεῖν	to execute judgment (John 5:27)
ποιήσας τέρατα	performing wonders (Acts 7:36)

The translation of a single Greek word using multiple different English words is pointedly illustrated in Revelation 13, where the ESV renders ποιέω with five distinct English words over the course of four verses.

42. For the longer lists upon which my abbreviated list is largely based, see Fee & Strauss (*How to Choose a Translation*, 52–54) and Strauss (“Do Literal Bible Versions Show Greater Respect,” 4–5).

Revelation 13:12–15	Revelation 13:12–15 (ESV)
τὴν ἐξουσίαν τοῦ πρώτου θηρίου πᾶσαν ποιεῖ	It exercises all the authority of the first beast
ποιεῖ τὴν γῆν καὶ τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ κατοικοῦντας ἵνα προσκυνήσουσιν	and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship
ποιεῖ σημεῖα μεγάλα	It performs great signs
διὰ τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ποιῆσαι	by the signs that it is allowed to work
ἵνα . . . ἡ εἰκὼν τοῦ θηρίου . . . ποιήσῃ ἵνα ὅσοι ἐὰν μὴ προσκυνήσωσιν τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θηρίου ἀποκτανθῶσιν	so that the image of the beast . . . might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain

What is particularly interesting is the varied rendering of ποιέω as “perform” and “work” with the same direct object (σημεῖα “signs”) in immediately adjacent verses (14–15). Here neither collocational restrictions nor contextual factors require the difference in translation; it is merely a matter of stylistic variation.⁴³

Grammatical gender is another vexed issue in translation whose handling requires some sensitivity to differences between the gender systems of the world’s languages.⁴⁴ As Poythress warns, “In the context of discussing gender language, simple appeals to a form-meaning distinction easily become oversimple, because in actual languages the two come together in form-meaning composites, and they interact; they are not strictly separable.”⁴⁵ With grammatical gender, pronouns are only as “truly” (biologically)

43. A sensitivity to the difference in semantic range between words from two languages is essential to good translation. “Words are living things, full of shades of meaning, full of associations; and, what is more, they are apt to change their significance from one generation to the next. The translator who understands his job feels, constantly, like Alice in Wonderland trying to play croquet with flamingoes for mallets and hedgehogs for balls; words are for ever eluding his grasp” (Ronald Knox, *The Trials of a Translator* [London: Sheed & Ward, 1949], 13).

44. On the subject, see D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book, 1998); Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation & Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998); Vern Poythress & Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000); Mark L. Strauss, “Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate: A Response to Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Both (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 115–41.

45. Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Comments on Mark Strauss’s Response,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 74 (2012): 139.

“masculine” or “feminine” as their antecedents.⁴⁶ Thus, in English we generally reserve “he” and “she” for biologically male and female antecedents, respectively (with occasional exceptions, such as generic “he” or “she” in reference to ships). Things without biological gender are referred to by the neuter pronoun “it” (this pronoun is also often used for animals if the gender of the animal is unknown or irrelevant). Consequently, in translating from Greek into English, it is right to translate a masculine pronoun with the neuter “it” if the antecedent is non-personal or inanimate. Similarly, it is sometimes defensible to translate a singular pronoun with a “singular they” (per the usage of modern English) if the antecedent is not gender-specific.⁴⁷ Below are a few examples of translating grammatical gender accurately requiring more than just a simplistic view of gender based on English.

First Peter 2:6 in the ESV reads: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” The object of belief is identified by the masculine singular pronoun “him.” In the Greek, this pronoun αὐτῷ could refer to Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ mentioned in the preceding verse, or to the stone (λίθον), which is also masculine singular. Referentially, the two are the same, but, in terms of sense, and given the syntactic flow of the sentence, it is probably the stone that is in view.⁴⁸ If this is so, the rendering “whoever believes in it” would be perfectly defensible, if not preferable, the neuter pronoun “it” being the accurate means in English of referring to the inanimate antecedent “stone.”⁴⁹ By translating with “him,” the English reader is referred back to “Jesus Christ,” not to the “stone.” The issue becomes more interesting when looked at through the lens of French. In French, “stone” is feminine (*une pierre*). Thus, in translating the pronoun αὐτῷ, the translators must pick *Jésus-Christ* as the antecedent and render αὐτῷ as *lui* (“him”), or pick the stone as the antecedent and render αὐτῷ as *elle* (“her”).

46. Cf. the comments in Fee & Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation*, 98. Cf. also Mark L. Strauss, “Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate.”

47. See Poythress & Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, for important discussion on the potential dangers of using singular “they” versus generic “he.” See also the exchange between Vern Poythress (“Gender Neutral Issues in the New International Version of 2011,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 [2011]: 79–96; also “Comments on Mark Strauss’s Response”) and Mark L. Strauss (“Gender-Language Issues in the NIV 2011: A Response to Vern Poythress,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 74 [2012]: 119–32). Without always necessarily agreeing with him on how to translate particular verses, I find Poythress’ pronouncement on this issue to be sound: the “only sensible course seems to me to be to use all the resources of the English language, including generic ‘he’ as well as plurals, and to try to render each verse with maximal accuracy” (“Comments on Mark Strauss’s Response,” 142).

48. See Paul R. Kroeger, *Analyzing Meaning: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*, Textbooks in Language Sciences 5 (Berlin: Language Science Press, 2018), 21–22, for a brief but insightful discussion of the difference between sense and reference (or denotation).

49. The Hebrew (יִשְׂרָאֵל) of Isa 28:16 does not specify a direct object. In the LXX, in the context of the first person reference ἐγὼ ἐμβαλῶ in a direct quote of the Lord (κύριος), the third singular ἐπ’ αὐτῷ more clearly refers back to the stone (λίθον) than does Peter’s reference. However, it could be argued that the unnaturalness of the collocation of “believing in” and the neuter pronoun “it” makes the translation “him” preferable.

Contrary to English translations, French translations have overwhelmingly chosen to take the stone as the antecedent and translate *elle*. While this might surprise English speakers, it is correct French and is just as (or more) accurate as translating with “him” in English. In both English and French, the original ambiguity of the antecedent of $\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\omicron}$ must be removed, and the translators must make an interpretive decision.

In Jeremiah 2:24, the Lord upbraids Israel for running after false gods like a wild donkey of the desert runs after a mate. The text describes a donkey sniffing at the wind $\text{בְּאַוֶּן נַפְשׁוֹ}$ (woodenly: “in the desire of his soul”). Here, the possessive is masculine singular, perhaps intended to accord with פָּרָה “wild donkey.” However, a few words later, it becomes clear that the donkey is a female, as indicated by the feminine singular possessive on תְּאַנְתָּהּ “her lust/desire.” Rightly interpreting the context, but departing from the masculine singular possessive on נַפְשׁוֹ , the ESV translates $\text{בְּאַוֶּן נַפְשׁוֹ}$ as “in her heat.” While a masculine pronoun works in Hebrew, accurate English translation (focused on accurately conveying meaning) must translate this masculine pronoun as feminine.

An even more complex case of gender translation is found in Amos 9:11. In the Hebrew, the (presumed) antecedent of the following possessives is a feminine singular noun $\text{סֶכֶת דָּוִד הַנִּפְלֵת}$ (“the fallen booth of David”). However, the following pronominal suffixes are, respectively, פְּרָצֶיהָ (“their breaches,” feminine plural), הָרִסְתָּיו (“his ruins,” masculine singular), and וּבְנִיתֶיהָ (“and I will rebuild her,” feminine singular). It is possible to try to identify implicit antecedents for the pronouns (such as the feminine plural עָרִים “cities”—feminine, despite its masculine plural form—for the antecedent of הָ-). Still, such attempts do not amount to more than speculation. No evidence suggests that these seemingly mismatched pronominal suffixes are the result of textual corruption. Nevertheless, the ESV (as the NIV and NLT) translates both these genders and numbers as the neuter singular “it,” following appropriate English usage.

Amos 9:11 (MT) Amos 9:11 (ESV)

$\text{בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא}^{11}$ ¹¹ In that day

$\text{אֶקִּים אֶת־סֶכֶת דָּוִד הַנִּפְלֵת}$ I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen,

$\text{וְנִדְרָתֶיהָ אֶת־פְּרָצֶיהָ}$ and repair **its** breaches,

$\text{וְהָרִסְתָּיו אֶקִּים}$ and raise up **its** ruins

$\text{וּבְנִיתֶיהָ כִּימֵי עוֹלָם}$ and rebuild **it** as in the days of old

This solution is nothing novel. More than two millennia earlier, the translator(s) of LXX Amos had already harmonized the gender and number of the pronominal suffixes, only he/they went with all feminine ($\text{\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\iota\kappa\omicron\delta\omicron\mu\acute{\eta}\sigma\omega \tau\acute{\alpha} \pi\epsilon\pi\tau\omega\kappa\acute{\omicron}\tau\alpha \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma \kappa\alpha\iota \tau\acute{\alpha} \kappa\alpha\tau\epsilon\sigma\kappa\alpha\mu\acute{\mu}\epsilon\upsilon\alpha \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\sigma\omega \kappa\alpha\iota \acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\iota\kappa\omicron\delta\omicron\mu\acute{\eta}\sigma\omega \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\eta}\nu}$ “I will build up her fallen parts, and raise up her destroyed parts, and build her up”) in accord with the feminine singular antecedent $\text{τὴν σκηνὴν Δαυὶδ τὴν πεπτωκυῖαν}$ (“the fallen tent of

David”). Just fewer than two millennia ago, the apostle James quoted this (or another OG) translation as the scriptural basis for the decisions detailed in the decree of the first general assembly (Acts 15:16). Translators must always be alert to the necessity of this kind of gender change to accurately match the gender of pronouns with the gender of the antecedent in the receptor language.

In the discussion above about idioms, figures of speech, collocational restrictions, and gender, I have given examples of instances where translators have departed from the forms of the original text to communicate the sense of the original accurately. There are many more reasons why translators might need to employ an expression or phrase in a receptor language that differs formally from the source text.⁵⁰ It takes an understanding of the issues and careful attention to each passage to work through these difficulties. In these cases, a linguistically uninformed notion of “word-for-word” translation is supremely unhelpful.⁵¹

3.3. Is not in line with the practice of Jesus’ and the apostles’ use of the Greek OT

Jesus’ and the apostles’ use of the OT shows that they were not averse to using Greek translations of the Hebrew (or possibly making their own Greek translations)—translations that are frequently not “essentially literal” renderings of the extant Hebrew text(s).

3.3.1. New Testament quotations of the Greek Old Testament

In the case of Jesus, it is unclear whether he ever used or quoted from the Greek OT. What is clear is that some of his quotations of Scripture, as reported in Greek by the Gospel writers, are drawn from the LXX or other existing Greek OT translations, or, at least, are not formally direct (“essentially literal”) renderings of the MT tradition. For instance, when Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 against the hypocritical Pharisees, the quoted text in Mark 7:6–7 aligns closely with the LXX but diverges from the MT in more than merely formal details, as shown below.

50. Cf. Brunn’s discussion on the criteria for adjustment (*One Bible, Many Versions*, 85–98), as well as his list of twenty-six ways in which every English version deals with the original texts (*ibid.*, 189–90). Issues such as clusivity (whether the addressee is included in first person plural references), evidentiality (the grammatically necessary encoding of the source of information), or valency differences (such as the lack of a passive voice) are often not even known to English speakers but represent the kind of translation issues faced by those who translate the Scriptures into many languages of the world.

51. As Ronald Knox warned, “The sentence, the phrase, the word—over all these the translator must keep watch; must beware of the instinct which bids him save trouble, or avoid criticism, by giving a merely photographic reproduction of his original” (*Trials of a Translator*, 15).

Mark 7:6–7

Οὗτος ὁ λαὸς τοῖς χεῖλεσίν με
τιμᾷ ἢ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω
ἀπέχει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ μάτην δὲ
σέβονταί με, διδάσκοντες
διδασκαλίας ἐντάλματα
ἀνθρώπων

Isaiah 29:13 (LXX and MT)

Ἐγγίξει μοι ὁ λαὸς οὗτος τοῖς χεῖλεσιν
αὐτῶν τιμῶσιν με ἢ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν
πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ μάτην δὲ
σέβονταί με διδάσκοντες ἐντάλματα
ἀνθρώπων καὶ διδασκαλίας

גָּזַח הָעַם הַזֶּה בְּפִיו וּבִשְׂפָתָיו כִּבְדוּנִי
וְלִבּוֹ רָחַק מִמֶּנִּי
וְהָיָה יְהוָה אֹתָם אֲתִי מִצְוֹת אֲנִי מְלַמֵּם:

The text of Mark 7:6–7 and the (LXX) Greek text of Isaiah 29:13 differ primarily in Mark’s “dropping” of the opening words ἐγγίξει μοι “draws near to me.” The demonstrative is then fronted and ὁ λαὸς “the people” is read as the subject of the remaining verb (“honor”), which is changed from the plural τιμῶσιν “they honor” (which aligns with the collective sense of λαός) to the singular τιμᾷ (which aligns with the grammatical number of λαός). The only other change comes at the end of the quoted passage, where Mark’s version has rearranged the order of the last few words and dropped the conjunction καὶ, slightly altering the sense of the phrase. The largely verbatim agreement between Mark 7:6–7 and this Greek version of Isaiah 29:13 certainly suggests that the former is quoting from the latter.

But the Greek text of Isaiah 29:13 does not agree “word-for-word” with its presumed Hebrew *Vorlage*, even when we discount differences such as word order. For instance, the Greek simply states ἐγγίξει μοι, and does not specify that the drawing near is בְּפִי “with its mouth.” The verb σέβονταί “they worship” may be taken as a loose equivalent of אֵתְּוּ אֵתָּוּ “their worship of me,” but μάτην “in vain” is simply not explicitly in the Hebrew text.

So why does Jesus (Mark, carried along by the Holy Spirit) quote from a translation that does not “reproduce the very words” of Scripture (to apply Ryken’s and Grudem’s argumentation)? Does Jesus’ (Mark’s) use of such a “lax” translation belie a low view of the Scriptures or constitute an implicit denial of verbal, plenary inspiration? I am confident that neither Ryken nor Grudem would ever countenance such an accusation, but a consistent application of their reasoning would undoubtedly suggest such a conclusion.

This is just one small example. A thorough pass through works such as Beale & Carson or Archer & Chirichigno produces dozens of such examples, including some where the quoted Greek text diverges even more from the Hebrew text (e.g., James’s use in Acts 15 of Amos 9).⁵² This pattern seems to indicate that the authors of the NT

52. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (eds.), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Gleason Archer and Gregory Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament: A Complete Survey* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983).

were content to quote the commonly used Greek translation even when (and sometimes, because) it did not represent an “essentially literal” rendering of the Hebrew text.⁵³ This issue has not been adequately addressed by those who argue that affirmation of verbal, plenary inspiration entails the superiority of “essentially literal” translations (and thus, a preference for and use of such translations).

3.3.2. Inspired translation

The NT contains a number of “inspired translations,” namely, instances where a word or phrase is given in Hebrew or Aramaic (or Latin, as in Mark 15:16) and then translated into Greek, under the inspiration of the Spirit.⁵⁴ For the most part, these are translated fairly directly, but there is at least one Spirit-inspired functional equivalence rendering, where implicit material is made explicit.⁵⁵ In Mark 5:41, what is clearly imperative in Aramaic (ܩܝܡܝ ܩܝܡܝ; ταλιθα κουμ “little girl, get up”) is morphologically ambiguous in Greek, where ἐγειρε could be an imperative (“get up”) or an aorist active indicative third person singular (“she got up,” with the movable-*nu* “moved”). Apart from clarification, this would remain grammatically (even if not contextually) ambiguous; however, Mark adds the explanatory words σοὶ λέγω (“I say to you”), which introduce direct speech, clarifying that an imperative is intended.

3.3.3. Translating divine names or titles

Ryken criticizes the NIV (and other translations) for the translators’ decision (noted in their preface) to render יהוה צבאות “LORD of hosts (ESV)” with “LORD Almighty,” commenting, “Where the translators get the added idea of God’s being *all*-powerful is not evident.”⁵⁶ It is not evident to Ryken because he is (apparently) unaware of the more than one hundred times the LXX has παντοκράτωρ (“almighty”) where the MT has יהוה צבאות. For example, the LXX of Jeremiah 38:36 (MT 31:35) renders what, in the Hebrew *Vorlage*, was presumably יהוה צבאות as παντοκράτωρ (so NIV “almighty”). In other words, the NIV translators get it from (among other places) the oldest and

53. Jerome’s claim to the opposite, notwithstanding (*Letter* 57.11, to Pammachius): “[The LXX] has been used by the apostles (only however in places where it does not disagree with the Hebrew).”

54. See Matthew 1:23, 27:33, 46; Mark 3:17, 7:11, 34, 15:22, 34; John 1:38, 41, 42, 9:7, 20:16; Acts 1:19, 4:36, 9:36, 13:8.

55. The sample is small enough and dominated by proper nouns to the extent that it is difficult to extrapolate “tendencies.” However, the preponderance of direct translations in these texts does not negate the significance of the clear instance of a Spirit-inspired functional equivalence rendering in Mark 5:41.

56. *The Word of God in English*, 142. Ryken is not, of course, denying or questioning that God is all-powerful. His claim is merely that it is not evident how this is derived from the Hebrew word יהוה צבאות. For his criticisms of the NIV’s translation decision, see *The Word of God in English*, 141–42, 201; “Five Myths about Essentially Literal Bible Translation,” in *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation*, Wayne Grudem, C. John Collins, Vern Sheridan Poythress, Leland Ryken, Bruce Winter (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 65; *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 74, 90.

(arguably) most influential translation of the OT—the translation widely used by the NT writers.

The relevance of the apostles to this discussion goes beyond their use of the LXX—which, in a majority of cases, makes the same translational decision as the NIV regarding how to render *הַאֱלֹהִים*—and extends to an actual quotation of this particular translation decision of the LXX.⁵⁷ In 2 Corinthians 6:16–18, Paul quotes from the Old Greek (LXX?) of 2 Samuel 7:8, 14, Isaiah 52:11, and Jeremiah 38:1, 9. This rendering of 2 Samuel 7:8 has *παντοκράτωρ* (“almighty”; so also NIV) where the MT has *הַאֱלֹהִים*.⁵⁸ This evidently didn’t bother Paul, even though he had other options, as we see from Romans 9:29, where, quoting from Isaiah, Paul simply transliterates *הַאֱלֹהִים* as *σαβαωθ* (cf. James 5:4). Notably, what Paul doesn’t do in either case is to use a direct translation (using, for example, an “essentially literal” equivalent such as *στρατιῶν* “hosts, companies,” *στρατευματων* “armies,” or *λεγιωνων* “legions” for *הַאֱלֹהִים*): he uses either a functional equivalent (*παντοκράτωρ*) or a transliteration (*σαβαωθ*).⁵⁹

The discussion above, about how to translate *הַאֱלֹהִים*, brings to mind an issue that rarely surfaces in discussions of differences between English Bible translations (perhaps because this is not really an area of difference; there is great uniformity of practice across the translation spectrum), namely, how to handle the Divine Name. Of all words, this one is surely inspired; of all words, this one must be maintained, unmolested by the ravages of functional equivalence. Yet, even the ESV follows functional equivalence practice in this crucial instance, translating *יהוה* as “Lord” (or, in modern biblical typographic convention, “LORD”), following Tyndale, the Vulgate, the LXX, Masoretic vocalization tradition, and so on. It hardly needs to be pointed out that, whatever the precise meaning of *יהוה*, its closest, most “essentially literal” English equivalent is not “LORD.” Yet, this is how the ESV translates the very name of God thousands of times throughout the OT.⁶⁰

57. It should be pointed out that “the LXX,” which (as a whole OT) is almost surely not the work of a single translator or committee of translators, shows diversity on how to handle the translation of *הַאֱלֹהִים*. So, for example, while *παντοκράτωρ* is the translation of choice in most of the prophets and in a few instances in 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles, the transliteration *σαβαωθ* prevails in the historical books and in the prophet Isaiah.

58. Paul also gives (either following or changing the Greek text in front of him, or giving his own Greek translation deviating from the MT) the plural *υιους* “sons” in lieu of the singular *υιον*, “obscuring” the messianic reference, and further obscures it by giving the gender-inclusive *υιους και θυγατερας* “sons and daughters” instead of *υιον*.

59. In Revelation 4:8, the language of the eternal song of the four living creatures closely echoes that of the seraphim’s song in Isaiah 6:3. In the latter passage, the Hebrew uses the title *הַאֱלֹהִים*; typical of LXX Isaiah, the translator(s) transliterate(s) this as *σαβαωθ*. However, like Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:18, John uses *παντοκράτωρ* in Revelation 4:8 (whether what he heard or a translation of what he heard). The title *παντοκράτωρ* is a favorite of John in Revelation, whose usage in that book accounts for all but one occurrence of the title in the NT (Paul’s being the only other instance).

60. I am not suggesting that the ESV’s choice in this matter (which matches many other translations) is wrong. I am suggesting that it is contrary to consistent adherence to principles of “essentially literal” translation and contrary to the condemnation of functional equivalence practices on the basis of the latter’s supposed incompatibility with verbal, plenary inspiration.

3.4. *Confuses properties and treatment of original text versus translation*

Ryken claims that “dynamic equivalence is based on an elementary confusion of translation with interpretation.”⁶¹ Ironically, Ryken’s conception of the ideal “essentially literal” translation is (at least partially) based on his “elementary confusion” as regards the categorical difference between original text and translation. In fact, he often writes in ways that seem to belie his confusion on this point.⁶²

For example, at the very beginning of his *Understanding English Bible Translation*, Ryken characterizes “dynamic equivalence” theory (as applied in English translations) as holding (wrongly, he thinks) that “translators should feel free to give English readers a substitute for the actual words of the original Hebrew and Greek texts.”⁶³ Of course, translators must do precisely that; otherwise, they are simply scribes, transmitting the Hebrew (and Aramaic) and Greek texts, rather than translators.

In another place, he writes, “[W]e never know when a dynamic equivalent translation gives us the ‘real thing’ and when it gives us a substitute or an added overlay of editorial commentary. It is the ‘not knowing’ that is a major part of the problem.”⁶⁴ Again, Ryken wrongly envisions translation as ideally giving us the “real thing” (which is the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, not the translation) and wrongly characterizes only “dynamic equivalent” translations as a “substitute” (whereas, all translations substitute receptor language words, idioms, metaphors, and so forth for their Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek “equivalents”). In short, Ryken often applies principles to translation that should be properly applied to the original language texts (specifically, in the work of textual criticism).

Contra Ryken’s many claims, functional equivalence in translation is not tantamount to tampering with or changing the wording of the text in the original languages. He is (basically) right to claim that “[t]he fixedness of the text is a literary principle,” but he seems to misunderstand that the text whose “fixedness” is crucial is

61. *The Word of God in English*, 84. Anyone actually involved in translation will know that the question is not whether translation involves interpretation but what kinds of interpretation are involved and to what extent interpretation is made explicit.

62. Perhaps this should not be surprising given Ryken’s lack of training on these issues: “He has also acknowledged in a public forum that he does not know and has never studied Hebrew or Greek, that he knows no modern language other than English, and has never attempted to translate anything” (Rodney J. Decker, “Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation,” 52).

63. *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 17.

64. *Ibid.*, 174. This statement, in particular, seems to reveal one of Ryken’s major personal concerns, perhaps because he’s basically dependent on English (Rodney J. Decker, “Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation,” 52). Quotations that show Ryken’s confusion over the differences between original texts and translations could be multiplied *ad nauseam*. As one final example, Ryken declares, “I do not want a translation committee’s filtered version of the original text; I want the original text. I want the real or actual Bible, not a substitute Bible” (*Understanding English Bible Translation*, 119). Of course, when he says, “I want the original text,” I think it’s fair to say he actually means he wants a particular style of translation of an edition of manuscript copies of the original text, in other words, an English “substitute” for the original text.

the original text of the Scriptures (the standard against which all translations are to be checked) and not the text of Ryken’s preferred translation(s).⁶⁵

In reality, a translation must often clarify or expand the original text to accurately convey the meaning of the original.⁶⁶ This is illustrated, for example, in 2 Corinthians 3:17. The Greek text is the terse οὐ δὲ τὸ πνεῦμα κυρίου, ἐλευθερία (woodenly: “now where the Spirit of the Lord—freedom”). While fine Greek, a formally direct translation here (as in many places) wouldn’t be the most accurate rendering, and so, even most “essentially literal” translations (as well as the “optimal equivalence” CSB) expand to something like, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (ESV, CSB, RSV; cf. NASB, KJV, and most other translations).

The fundamental distinction between the original text and translations of that text is nicely showcased in John 7:39.⁶⁷ In this passage, the most widely used Greek texts (NA28, UBS5; also SBLGNT) read: οὐπω γὰρ ἦν πνεῦμα (woodenly: “for not yet was [the] Spirit”; following Ⱳ N* T Θ Ψ as well as several versional witnesses and patristic citations). The Tyndale House GNT (along with the Byzantine text of Robinson and Pierpont) includes the adjective ἅγιον “holy” after πνεῦμα (following L W Δ 0105 0141 as well as the majority of Byzantine manuscripts, lectionaries, and several patristic citations).⁶⁸ Either one of these statements, οὐπω γὰρ ἦν πνεῦμα or οὐπω γὰρ ἦν πνεῦμα ἅγιον, could be misunderstood to imply that there was a time when the Holy Spirit did not exist. This seems to be the motivation of the scribe(s) who added δεδομένον (“given,” and possibly ἅγιον) to this clause (a reading reflected in no Greek manuscript other than B, but attested in versional witnesses and a patristic citation). Thus far, the textual evidence. Interestingly, most modern translations, including most “essentially literal” translations (e.g., NASB, RSV, ESV, but cf. NRSV, “for as yet there was no Spirit”), include a rendering that parallels the (almost certainly) unoriginal reading πνεῦμα ἅγιον δεδομένον.⁶⁹

This phenomenon is further illustrated in Revelation 15:4, where the Greek is ὅτι μόνος ὁσιος (woodenly: “because only holy”; NA28, UBS5, SBLGNT, THGNT; Robinson & Pierpont reads ἅγιος instead of ὁσιος). It is not immediately clear what the adjectives μόνος and ὁσιος are supposed to modify. The mismatch in grammatical

65. *The Word of God in English*, 184.

66. Ryken wants this fullness of meaning, claiming, “Every possible nuance of meaning that resides in the words of the original must be carried over into the words of a translation” (ibid., 128). Whereas, “People who are sensitive to fine nuances of meaning and who know the original languages sufficiently well begin to recognize that translation is a matter of more or less, not always the exact representation of every aspect of meaning” (Vern Poythress, “Bible Translations for Muslim Readers”).

67. I am indebted to Fee & Strauss (*How to Choose a Translation*, 117–18) for highlighting this and the previous example.

68. Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform*, 2nd edition (Southborough, MA: Chilton Book Publishing, 2005).

69. Notably, the important 4th century Codex Vaticanus (B) does preserve this longer reading with both ἅγιον and δεδομένον: πνεῦμα ἅγιον δεδομένον (as do a few versional witnesses and one reference in Eusebius). The original reading of D witnesses a uniquely “Western” reading (along with Old Latin): οὐπω γὰρ ἦν τὸ πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς “the Holy Spirit was not yet upon them.”

gender precludes the association of *μόνος* and *ὅσιος* (masculine) with an implicit *τὸ ὄνομά* “name” (neuter). The context suggests that it is God himself who is in view, and this conclusion appears to be reflected in the addition of the verb *εἶ* (“you are”) in a few manuscripts (notably P47; also 1006, 1841). Most English translations follow this understanding and render *ὅτι μόνος ὅσιος* as “for you alone are holy” (ESV, NLT, NASB, NIV), giving English that, in form, more closely matches the textual addition in certain manuscripts than the original text.

Without needing to give my own opinion, it is evident in these cases that translators from both “literal” and “functional” persuasions find it appropriate to carefully expand the English translation of the Greek expression in a bid for accuracy, bringing clarity and avoiding misunderstanding. At the same time, I am confident that very few, if any, modern translators would find it appropriate to amend the Greek text similarly. Why is this? I think it is because translators recognize that there is a fundamental, categorical difference between an original text (whose exact wording is to be preserved) and translations of an original text (which will employ various practices and principles, including introducing clarifying words or phrases, to try to communicate accurately and clearly).⁷⁰

Unfortunately, Ryken seems to be confused about this crucial distinction between original text and translations and how some principles (e.g., “fixedness of the text”) that apply to the former do not apply to the latter. Perhaps his confusion belies a (noble, but wrong-headed) desire and attempt to preserve the inspiration of the original in an “essentially inspired” translation (whereas no translation is inspired).⁷¹

3.5. *Is not in line with the historical practice and statements of many translators*

If it could be shown that functional equivalence in translation is a strictly modern innovation without historical precedent, this would certainly call into doubt the validity of such a translation method. Ryken claims that dynamic equivalence is such an innovation in English Bible translation, suggesting that such an “equivalent” method of translation is a novelty of the twentieth century.⁷²

70. Ryken himself comes close to recognizing this distinction when he notes that “no one has produced editions of the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts that alter the texts in the ways that many modern translations have done” (*The Word of God in English*, 30). However, rather than grasping this distinction, Ryken sees it as confirmation that the wording of translations should likewise be kept inviolate. Instead of recognizing that the original texts are “permanent” and that translations are “ever-changing,” he sees the fact that translations are “ever-changing instead of permanent” as a destabilization of the text (*ibid.*, 187).

71. Contra, for example, Allert’s claim that “[t]ranslations, therefore, can be viewed as inspired” (Craig D. Allert, “Is a Translation Inspired? The Problems of Verbal Inspiration for Translation and a Proposed Solution,” in *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Stanley Porter & Richard Hess [London: T&T Clark International, 2004], 112). Decker’s discussion of inspiration is helpfully clarifying regarding the limits of the application of the term “inspired” (“Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation,” 27–30).

72. *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 15. Ortlund propagates this same mistaken notion: “The creation of functional equivalent translations in the middle of the twentieth century

The issues underlying Bible translation have always been momentous, technical, and complex. But until the mid-twentieth century, English Bible translators worked within a consensus regarding the goals and methods of Bible translation. . . . Everything changed with the advent of dynamic equivalence as a theory and practice of English Bible translation.

Or again, “With a suddenness that remains a mystery, in the middle of the last century principles of translation that had been virtually unchallenged for centuries suddenly became passé for a majority of translators.”⁷³ He pictures modern translators as linguistic practitioners unaccountable to other disciplines (a notion that will quickly be dispelled if one studies the composition of modern English translation teams and their consultants): “One of the problems with Bible translation for the last half century is that it has been an ‘in-group’ project in which linguistic specialists have done their work in a self-contained world. They have not been held accountable by scholars in other disciplines.”⁷⁴ Whatever one’s view of the virtues or vices of functional equivalence, it cannot be rightly claimed that this general approach to translation (even if not under the label “functional equivalence”) arose in the mid-twentieth century.

The relative homogeneity of mainline translations from Tyndale (1526) down to the beginning of the 20th century is largely a function of the genealogical relation of these translations, not the result of a supposed methodological concurrence of multiple independent translations spanning those centuries.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the history of English Bible translation (even including the Wycliffe translations from the late fourteenth century) would be too short a span to conclude the complete novelty of functional equivalence. As we will see, evidence from other languages and earlier times shows that there has long been, among translators, a sense of the tension between accurately conveying meaning and following the forms of the original.

First, a note is in order about “tendencies” in the history of English Bible translations. Even the earliest substantial English translation of the Scriptures, namely, that identified with the followers and associates of John Wycliffe (and probably translated by Nicholas de Hereford and John Trevisa), had two versions.⁷⁶ The early version was very formally direct (based on Latin, not Hebrew and Greek), and it was

is a novel introduction in the long history, stretching across thousands of years, of Bible translation” (“On Words, Meaning, Inspiration, and Translation,” 101).

73. *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 17.

74. *The Word of God in English*, 23. Knox wryly notes, “If you translate the Bible, you are liable to be cross-examined by anybody; because everybody thinks he knows already what the Bible means” (*Trials of a Translator*, 106).

75. Mark Strauss points out that idiomatic translations into English had already begun to proliferate in the first three decades of the 20th century (“Bible Translation and the Myth of ‘Literal Accuracy,’” *Review and Expositor* 108.2 [2011]: 170). He notes, in particular, Edgar J. Goodspeed’s statement in his 1923 translation (“I wanted my translation to make on the reader something of the impression the New Testament must have made on its earliest readers”), made long before the influence of Eugene Nida, that seems to express something like dynamic equivalence theory.

76. Cf. chapter 5 in David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

soon revised to be less formally direct and more understandable, generally marking a move away from “literalness” (though still fairly direct).

Following the Wycliffe versions, but unrelated to them, William Tyndale produced the first translation of the New Testament into Modern English; this was also the first time the NT was translated from Greek into English. After Tyndale, English translations basically built upon his work, initially filling in Old Testament portions left untranslated by Tyndale by translating from Latin and German: Coverdale (1535), Matthew’s (1537), Great Bible (1539). Not officially a revision of the Tyndale tradition, but still very much within that tradition, the Geneva Bible (1560) provided the first complete English Old Testament translated from Hebrew. The following two revisions of the Tyndale tradition, the Bishop’s Bible (1568) and King James Version (1611) benefitted from the advances of the Geneva Bible to varying extents.

Thus, from the beginning of English Bible translation in Modern English (Tyndale) to the King James Version, all widely used translations were closely related, most being direct revisions of what had gone before. Then, from the production of the KJV until the 20th century, the KJV remained basically uncontested in widespread usage.

The KJV was arguably the most significant updating of the Tyndale translation up to that time. Yet, even the translators of the KJV were (officially, though not always in practice) bound to the text of the Tyndale tradition.⁷⁷ The first of Bishop Bancroft’s rules for the translators of the KJV was that the text of the Bishops’ Bible was “to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.”

One implication of this brief historical sketch is that the uniformity of the translations most widely used from the 16th through early 20th centuries is a result of the fact that there was, in substance, one main translation with varying degrees of modification. The uniformity was not the result of the conscious determination of each translator or team of translators independently settling on the same approach to translation.

Second, we must not construe the history of English Bible translation as representative of the tendencies of almost all translations until the mid-20th century. Ryken does not necessarily intend to do this, as his focus is only on the history of English Bible translation, in which functional equivalence principles gained ground in

77. In actual practice, the translators of the KJV followed a translation method that would not fully satisfy either proponents of “essentially literal” translation (with their propensity for concordance in translation) or proponents of thoroughgoing functional equivalence. For example (as outlined in their preface, “The Translators to the Reader”), the translators of the KJV favored variety of expression in translation over lexical concordance (“[W]ee have not tyed our selves to an uniformitie of phrasing, or to an identitie of words . . . that we should expresse the same notion in the same particular word . . . wee thought to savour more of curiositie then wisdome”), but were wary of removing possible (even if unlikely) interpretive options from their readers’ text (“They that are wise, had rather have their judgements at libertie in differences of readings, then to be captivated to one, when it may be the other.”). Their goal, similar to many functional equivalent translations, and contra notions that the KJV was translated into purposely archaic English, was that the Scriptures “may bee understood even of the very vulgar.”

the mid-20th century (marking a shift away from the Tyndale-KJV tradition). However, centuries of Bible translation history precedes the first translations into English, and a truly accurate assessment of the novelty of functional equivalence principles must take stock of this wider sweep of translation history.

Jews, Christians, and pagans alike have long recognized the difficulty of translating between two languages and the miscommunication that can occur with a direct translation that adheres too closely to source language forms. Thus, Ben Sira (prologue to *Sirach*, RSV) notes how “what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language.”

Jerome, one of the earliest and most influential Bible translators, quotes with approval from the preface to a work on the life of Saint Anthony:

A literal translation from one language into another obscures the sense; the exuberance of the growth lessens the yield. For while one’s diction is enslaved to cases and metaphors, it has to explain by tedious circumlocutions what a few words would otherwise have sufficed to make plain. . . . Leave others to catch at syllables and letters, do you for your part look for the meaning.⁷⁸

Jerome also quotes two Roman orators/writers from the first century BC as espousing a less than “essentially literal” translation method. Cicero explains: “I have not supposed myself bound to pay the words out one by one to the reader but only to give him an equivalent in value.” Horace advises: “And care not with over anxious thought to render word for word.”⁷⁹

About a millennium after Jerome, Luther carried out another historically significant translation, rendering the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into German for the first time. He explains that accurately conveying the sense of the text, and not woodenly following the forms of the original language, is the task of the translator: “Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather he must see to it—once he understands the Hebrew author—that he concentrates on the sense of the text.”⁸⁰ His goal was clear language that would be understandable to everyone: “We have taken care to use language that is clear and that everybody can understand, without perverting the sense and meaning.”⁸¹

78. Jerome, *Letter 57.6*. Ortlund (“On Words, Meaning, Inspiration, and Translation,” 101) is right to point out that, when it comes to Scripture, Jerome says he breaks from his preferred idiomatic translation style and translates in a more formally direct way (*Letter 57.5*). However, the justification that Jerome gives, namely, that even the word order in Scripture is a mystery (that is, divinely inspired), surely does not support Ortlund’s preferred translation method, since that method regularly departs from the inspired word order, as do more idiomatic translations.

79. Jerome, *Letter 57.5*.

80. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Word and sacrament* (vol. 35), ed. E. T. Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 213.

81. *Ibid.*, 253. For more on Luther as a translator, I refer the reader to Ernst Wendland’s work on the topic, to which parts of my related discussion are indebted (“Martin Luther—The Father of Confessional, Functional-Equivalence Bible Translation [Part 1],” *Notes on Translation 9.1* [1995]: 16–36.).

Long before the modern discussion, Luther had to wrestle with how to understand and translate the NT term *σάρξ* and related OT terms. The translation of this term is admittedly complex; as Richard B. Gaffin Jr. puts it, “The hallmark of Paul’s use of *sarx* is its complexity.”⁸² Luther, however, does not conclude that “our best course of action is to translate literally.”⁸³ Rather, he notes:

In a word, you will notice in the Scriptures that wherever “flesh” is mentioned in contradistinction to “spirit,” there you may regularly understand by “flesh” all that is contrary to the Spirit . . . whereas if it is mentioned on its own, you may know that there it means the physical state and nature . . . I could wish that this distinction of terms was preserved in our translation of the whole canon of Scripture.⁸⁴

The translators of the KJV, which is not generally a functional equivalence translation, shared Luther’s concern that the Scriptures be made understandable to all. In their preface, “The Translators to the Reader,” they declare: “[W]e desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, as in the language of Canaan, that it may be understood even of the very vulgar.”

While the translators preferred to keep interpretive options open to the reader, they had a good sense of the semantic range between related words in different languages. Thus, they were not afraid of rendering the same Hebrew or Greek word by various English words (“The Translators to the Reader”):

82. *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1987), 106. See the discussion in Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation,” 74–75, and in Douglas J. Moo, “‘Flesh’ in Romans: A Challenge for the Translator,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World*, ed. Scorgie, Glen G., Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Both (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 365–79. To his credit, Ryken does say about the translation of *σάρξ*: “Let me say forthrightly that there are no easy solutions to some of the key words in the original text of the Bible” (*The Word of God in English*, 180). Moo comments: “We understand why the NIV uses eight different English expressions to translate a single Greek word, *sarx*, in a single NT book, Colossians (note, by the way, that the ESV is not far behind with five different expressions)” (*We Still Don’t Get It*, 12–13).

83. Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 181. More closely following the advice of the German reformer than of their literary stylist, the translators of the ESV decided to translate *σάρξ* variously, according to the context. Usually they render it as “flesh,” but sometimes it is “human being” (Matt. 24:22; Mark 13:20), “physical” (Rom. 2:28), “natural” (Rom. 6:19), “fellow Jews” (Rom. 11:14), “worldly standards” (1 Cor. 1:26), “worldly” (1 Cor. 7:28), “people” (1 Cor. 10:18), “bodies” (2 Cor. 7:5) or “body” (Col. 2:5), “anyone” (σάρκι καὶ αἵματι, Gal 1:16), “one” (Gal. 2:16), “bodily” (Gal. 4:13), “condition” (Gal. 4:14), “earthly” (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22), “face” (Col. 2:1), “sensuous” (Col. 2:18), “lust” (2 Pet. 2:10), or “desire” (Jude 7). Sometimes the word is not explicitly translated (e.g. three times in 1 Cor. 15:39), and frequently enough these various translations of *σάρξ* do not have a footnote pointing the reader to the Greek (e.g. Matt. 24:22; Rom. 2:28; 6:19; 11:14; 1 Cor. 7:28; 2 Cor. 7:5; Gal. 2:16; Col. 2:5, 18). I do not criticize these translations; they show contextual sensitivity on the part of the translators and an understanding of the semantic range of the word (and of expressions in which it occurs).

84. *The Bondage of the Will*, 241–42.

An other thing we thinke good to admonish thee of (gentle Reader) that wee have not tyed our selves to an uniformitie of phrasing, or to an identitie of words, as some peradventure would wish that we had done, because they observe, that some learned men some where, have beene as exact as they could that way. . . . But, that we should expresse the same notion in the same particular word . . . wee thought to savour more of curiositie then wisdom, and that rather it would breed scorne in the Atheist, then bring profite to the godly Reader. For is the kingdome of God become words or syllables? why should wee be in bondage to them if we may be free, use one precisely when wee may use another no lesse fit, as commodiously?

Far from being a sudden innovation from the middle of the last century, idiomatic, functional equivalence translation has long been practiced by many and influential translators. Statements to the contrary fail to account for the historical data on the subject.⁸⁵ As Jerome put it, more than 1,500 years before the middle of the twentieth century, “Time would fail me if I cited as my witnesses all who have translated according to the sense.”⁸⁶

4. Concluding Remarks

As I have sought to demonstrate in the preceding pages, a strong view of the inspiration of Scripture as verbal and plenary does not entail an “essentially literal” approach as the best translation method. On the contrary, linguistic, scriptural, and historical indications align against such an entailment. Further, these data paint a picture of a varied approach to translation that reflects the complexity and trade-offs inherent to the task, the strengths and weaknesses of each translation method. Statements casting doubt on translators’ view of Scripture because they follow a functional equivalence (or “idiomatic” or “mediating”) translation theory should be abandoned. Statements suggesting the inherent superiority of “essentially literal” translations should be recognized for the error they are.

Instead, we should recognize the benefit of multiple kinds of translations (and of rigorous training in the biblical languages).⁸⁷ Each type of translation has strengths

85. I suspect that such statements reflect a historical view of translation limited to the history of Bible translation into modern English, starting with Tyndale in the early sixteenth century.

86. Jerome, *Letter 57.6*.

87. As Ortlund points out (“On Words, Meaning, Inspiration, and Translation,” 105), a weak and unbiblical view of inspiration (such as that offered by Mounce, “Do Formal Equivalent Translations Reflect a Higher View of Plenary, Verbal Inspiration?”) undercuts the impetus for training in biblical languages. If the exact words of the Scriptures in the biblical languages were merely human choices and not also sovereignly controlled by God, then direct access to them becomes much less important. Ironically, the notion that an “essentially literal” translation gives a “maximally transparent” view of the original texts would also seem to lessen the need for access to the texts in the biblical languages. On the other hand, the maintenance of a biblical doctrine of verbal inspiration, along with the recognition that an accurate translation will often not be able to mimic the grammatical and syntactic forms of the original, underscores the need for widespread training in the biblical languages.

and weaknesses.⁸⁸ A plurality of translations (at least potentially) allows readers who are limited to non-biblical languages to benefit from each translation's strengths and be guarded against the weaknesses of each translation. Informed practitioners (especially those with experience beyond English) on both ends of the translation method spectrum seem to recognize this already. Van Leeuwen notes, "It should be said at the outset that translations serve a variety of purposes and audiences. Thus there should be a variety of types of translations."⁸⁹ Decker concurs: "There is room for diversity in translations. Since no translation is perfect, multiple translations are not only helpful, but essential."⁹⁰

Given the limitations of each translation type, any one translation will not be able to communicate most effectively in every context, to every group of society, or every culture. In the English Bible translation scene, these limitations can happily be met by the variety of excellent translations that exist.⁹¹ However, many translators worldwide are faced with the task of producing a single translation to meet all the Bible translation needs of a particular language group, potentially for decades to come.

We should also recognize that no translation or spectrum of translations is needed for the spread of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁹² In his infinite wisdom, the Spirit uses the Scriptures, his sword (Eph. 6:17), to convert souls. However, he has also richly gifted his church, providing "the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers" (Eph. 4:12), the apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20) and the others for the ongoing preaching and teaching of the (usually translated) Word. The Word must be translated, but must also be preached and taught: "The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the

88. In this regard, see especially D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Functional Equivalence."

89. Raymond Van Leeuwen, "On Bible Translation and Hermeneutics," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, vol. 2), ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 284; cf. also his remarks on page 308.

90. "Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation," 59. Cf. also Fee & Strauss: "Unfortunately, something may be lost in the translation. This is another good reason to use more than one version and to choose translations from across the translation spectrum" (*How to Choose a Translation*, 57).

91. Fee & Strauss comment: "No Bible version can do everything, and the wealth of resources available today should be viewed as an asset rather than a liability" (*How to Choose a Translation*, 41).

92. As Poythress puts it: "No translation is going to capture every nuance of meaning in the original in a perfect way; and that is one reason why we train some people in knowledge of the original languages, and why we have preachers to continue to expound the meaning" ("Bible Translations for Muslim Readers"). Carson, also, notes that "sometimes translators give the impression that doing their job right is all that is needed. Although functional equivalence is an important—indeed, essential—component of good translation, we should tone down our claims for what it can achieve" ("The Limits of Functional Equivalence," 103). Elsewhere, he comments that "the spread of the gospel in the early church saw the dissemination of Scripture along with the provision of missionaries and pastors" (D. A. Carson, *Jesus, the Son of God: A Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 108; italics his), and he suggests that a lack of pastors and teachers could put undue pressure and expectation on translators.

word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, answer 155).