

# **Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 16, Review of Translation Issues and Best Practices**

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This is Dr. George Payton, who teaches Bible translation. This is session 16, Review of Translation Issues and Best Practices.

What I'd like to do now is review some of the issues we've been talking about and bring them back into mind. We mentioned the potential issues that could come up. We've now explored different things like idioms, metaphors, and unknown ideas, and I wanted to circle back and pick up what we said in the beginning so that we can then see how what we said, in the beginning connects with what we've just covered, but then it also will dovetail into what we're going to be talking about in the coming discussions.

So, we're talking about challenges in translation and communication this time. This is the broad overview of what we're communicating through this series, and we're reviewing not only the issues but also some best practices in how to handle those issues. As we recall, there are several qualities of a good translation, and the first one is it has to be accurate. It has to communicate the content of the biblical text, and that is first and foremost in our thinking, but we need to balance that with using normal, natural language and the target language, the language that the text is being translated into.

It has to be understood. If it's not understood, have we then translated? If I speak to you in another language, you don't understand what I'm saying unless someone is there to interpret for me and say, oh, George said this in whatever language it was. And so if we don't communicate, then have we translated at all, or have we translated well? The next thing is the translations that we produce for this particular community have to be acceptable to the community.

They have to like the language. They have to like the style of the translation. They have to be satisfied with how the translation was done.

It's not a given that everyone will always appreciate the translation that was done. I mentioned previously that there's a language in Tanzania. They had an older version of the New Testament that was done around 1900.

Later, another Bible agency, not Wycliffe, translated the Old Testament and redid the New Testament, so they did the whole Bible in about five or six years, very, very quickly. But the people don't like the translation. And I talk to them, why don't you like it? I don't know, we just don't like it.

So, people are not using it. So, did they do their job well? Not if it sits on the shelf and not if people don't like the translation because of the way it is. So that's one thing. It has to be acceptable.

It has to be what they're expecting. If they're expecting a translation that is more tied to Greek and Hebrew, maybe a little bit more formal-sounding language, maybe that's the style of what they understand scripture to be. That's the case if you work in Asia, for example, India, or in a Muslim context or a Hindu context, and they might expect a high level of language.

And if we give them something that sounds like something on the level of teenagers or even children, they might reject it because it is not what they were expecting. So we always need to keep the expectations of the people in mind. It should be impactful.

It should draw them in and communicate with them in a powerful way. We want it to be a beautiful product, but an impactful product. And as we said, it has to be according to what they are expecting.

How do we know that? This is a discussion that generally happens at the beginning of a translation project. What do you want? How can we help you meet the needs of your Christian community? How can we then agree on this and document this so that we all have this mutual understanding? And the term that's used in Bio-Translation Circles today is a translation brief. A translation brief is simply a document that says, this is how we're going to translate it, this is who the target audience is, this is who the people are that will be translating it, and this is what we're expecting.

And so laying out the expectations initially really, really helps so that you know what the people want, so that you're going to give them, you're going to not give them, but you're going to help them and work with them to produce the style and everything about the language that they want. And so we have these goals. And as we said, our goal is effective communication.

So we're working toward making a translation that is accurate, natural, clear, acceptable, impactful, and in line with the target audience. So that's our goal. We're working toward that.

They're ideals. That's what a good quality translation is. They're our goal.

But then, in addition to the goal, it's our standard of measurement. It's what we then check for after we've done the translation. We don't always have to wait until it's completely finished.

We can do it in stages, step by step, so that we know along the way that this is the translation style that we want, that this is how we want our footnotes, and that this is how we want the style of the page to be laid out. Everything can be spelled out first. We test it with people to see if we are on the right track. And then we go, and we continue the translation process.

Another thing we talked about is why is the Bible so hard to translate. Why is Bible translation challenging? We also talked about a number of Bible translation challenges. And it all stems from the fact that human communication is, as we might say, cryptic. It's under-specified.

We don't say everything that we could say. The economy of language is really, really appreciated. So if I say to you, Dallas won the game on Sunday, I'm leaving out a whole lot of information there.

First of all, what is Dallas, and what is a game? What game are you talking about? Right? But if you know I'm talking about the Cowboys, then you know that I'm talking about football, and you know that games are played on Sunday, and you know that they had a terrible season this year, and everything else, okay? All right. But we all use an economy of language because it just helps the communication flow. It helps say things in a concise way without being too wordy and without going into a lot of explanation because people then start tuning out if you start going into too much detail.

So, we say it that way to other people, and they say it that way to us, and we also see this same thing in writing and this nature of language. That's why we talked about language as communication and Bible translation as a subset of communication earlier in this series. So, we say things in shortened ways, and we assume that the other person can fill in the gaps.

If I say to my friend Dallas lost on Sunday, I assume that he knows all that we mentioned before, that Dallas is a football team, and it's a professional level team, etc. So, I assume that the guy can fill in the gaps. I assume that the other person knows what I'm talking about.

And so, we have shared knowledge of American culture, football, and specifics about the team. And I'm here in Dallas; that's where I live, so if I say Dallas didn't do so well, chances are the guy I'm talking to saw the game or at least was aware of how they did and what the score was. So, I'm assuming a lot of things by saying Dallas did well on Sunday.

And I'm assuming that he knows what I'm talking about, and I don't have to spell it all out. So shared knowledge enables us to be underspecified in our language. This shared knowledge can be of all kinds and different types.

It could be situational; it could be between me and another person, and we know the situation. So if I say to my wife, what about Friday night, and she says I have to work, nobody else but me and she knows what we're talking about. But there was a previous conversation that we had, hey, can we go out to dinner on Friday night? I don't know, and I'll have to see if I have to work, etc.

So, there's the situational knowledge that I and the other person might share, or that the speaker and a listener, or that the writer and the reader might share. Language is shared language; not only do we speak the same language, but we use language in similar ways. We also use language conventions that most people will understand.

Language is changing. I remember I was at Biola teaching there a number of years ago, and I went to a concert that was like a talent show. The guy who won was an amazing guitar player.

And so the next day, I said, hey, what do you think about the guy that won the talent show? I asked these Biola students, and they said he was ridiculous. And I thought, wow, that's kind of harsh. We did not have the same shared language.

Ridiculous was an adjective, meaning he did great. Okay, so generational language changes, and so you have to learn all these new words that people have come up with, like frenemy and kinds of other things. But shared usage of language and shared conventions of language.

Culture. We all come from the same culture. We know the cultural values.

We know culture is what is expected. So, we expect certain responses. We expect certain things to happen.

And it's the familiar. It's what we've come to know intuitively just by experiencing it our whole lives. So, language is familiar and expected.

And so we all share that. We all have a common worldview. Worldview is something that we don't normally talk about, but it's deep and internal, and it's in everyone in that culture.

And we have similar values. So, a worldview can be valued. A worldview can be what is true about the world and how we perceive the world.

In the West, we have a very scientific view of the world, and we can say okay, you view the world as the five senses. We know that there are other things out there, but do we have a belief system of the unseen world by and large? I would suggest no. However, people from other cultures have an extensive view of the unseen world.

So, there are differences in our worldview, but we all share that. So, we have all of this encyclopedic knowledge on so many different topics, so many different things that pertain to our group. And so, we all share that, and all of that enables language to be cryptic and unspecified.

So, what does this have to do with Bible translation? The people in the Bible had all those things that they shared in common. We are not one of those people from the Bible, so we do not share all that information. So, when they communicate in the Bible, they're communicating to a person that's in their knowledge group, but we don't have that.

And so we're 2,000 years removed from the New Testament times and even more from the Old Testament times. And that's a large part of the problem with translation. And because we don't have that shared knowledge, we are not able to fill in the gaps like someone from our own culture is.

So, when you produce a literal version that carries over the words of the text, you think, oh, well, everyone will understand. The question is, is there enough information for them to fill in the gaps? Those gaps come not only in literal translations but also in any translation that runs the risk of not being specific enough for the people who are reading the text. Okay, to continue, and so to achieve effective communication of the biblical message, we strive to fill in the gaps in the communication in the biblical text, or to look at it another way, we're trying to remove all of the hindrances or the barriers to communication as much as we can.

And we do that intentionally and actively because why? We want effective communication. Because Bible translation is fundamentally a human communication tool. And so we want effective communication so that the people receiving the translation can engage with it, understand it, benefit from it, and get all the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual benefits that we get from having it in our language and that people, through the ages have gotten from the scriptures.

As I said, literal translations often retain those gaps, and this results in a text that may not be understood or may not be natural. And I've found that when a text is not understandable, oftentimes it's not natural. Or if it's not natural, oftentimes, it is also not understandable.

And so, we need to guard against that. And in some cases, I've given examples in a previous talk where a literal translation can actually give the wrong meaning. So, we want effective communication in line with the expectations of the people, and we have to fill in the gaps in order to do that.

So, by removing these barriers, we are making it possible for the people to absorb and engage with the scripture. Many times, it is possible. Sometimes, it's not possible to remove the communication barriers, but most times, it is.

And how do we know that? Well, for one thing, starting with the translation of the Septuagint, the Hebrew Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek happened around 250 BC, thereabouts. Okay? Or 300 BC to 250 BC, when they started that. So we're talking about 2200 plus years of translation history from Hebrew to Greek, and then Greek into all these other languages, and thousands and thousands of languages have been translated over the years.

So yes, it is possible to translate the Bible effectively. Yes, it is possible to break down some of these barriers. Is it always possible? Not necessarily, but most of the time, the answer is yes.

And we have history to stand behind us to prove that. Okay, so we have to adjust linguistic features. The way that Hebrew or Greek says things is not the way that we talk today.

So, we rephrase that. A lot of times, we need to add information that's implied in the text so that people can make the connections between the words and what is said versus what is meant. And there's sometimes a difference between what it sounds like and what it actually means.

Okay? But it's not possible to overcome all of the gaps by putting things into the text or by tweaking or adapting the text. So, if it's not possible to do that, what do we do? Or sometimes it's not possible to do it well. How do we handle that? So here we are, moving into the field of best practices.

So, how can we supply information without putting it in the text? First of all, we have what's called paratextual or outside the text. So, it's supplemental material that we put into the book of the Bible, the New Testament, or the whole Bible, but it's not within the text itself. Like what? Footnotes.

We put in footnotes, and that can explain things in the text that are hard to understand, but people read the footnote, and it says, oh, the phrase harden their heart means this. Or the phrase washed his hands off means that. And so, we can explain things in the text, and sometimes, even if you make it a little bit more closely to the form of the Greek or the Hebrew, this is especially effective if you can explain it somewhere.

If you have a literal translation with no explanation, there will be gaps all over the place. So if you're going to be doing a literal translation or something that's more, let

me put it this way: form-based, closer to the Greek or Hebrew form, footnotes are essential. Otherwise, you can almost guarantee that you're going to have gaps.

And if you have gaps, will the people then be able to read it? And if they have to work so hard to understand it, they'll eventually give up. Just think about yourself. How many of us really want to read King James? It sounds like the 1600s.

We just can't. It's just too hard. So, if it's too much effort, they won't.

Footnotes help alleviate that burden on the reader. Second of all, glossaries. You can have a glossary of terms.

You can have a glossary of things like a temple, the Pharisees, and the Torah. You can have glossaries of places. You can have glossaries of people.

You can put a reference in your footnote; see this word in the glossary. So, using footnotes together with the glossary. And interestingly enough, all of these things that I'm talking about, there is a certain translation style that will evolve.

I remember when we were trying to do a cross-reference in a footnote, see Temple in the glossary. How do you say that in the language? Well, first of all, you have to invent a word for glossary. And so we said new words.

And so that glossary in the back, we labeled new words. How do you say see the temple in the new words? And what we said was to look for the word temple in the new words. So that whole sentence then became our standard way of having a cross-reference.

Now, if it's simply explaining something in the text, then you can say the word temple means the place where they would sacrifice animals to God or whatever you wanted to add. But then, if you want an extended explanation, then you would say the short thing in the footnote, and the long thing you can say, look for this word among the new words. Book introductions.

Book introductions are fantastic in getting people to have a frame of reference to hang the things that they're going to read about in the book, to hang it on that frame of reference. A colleague of mine was translating the Book of Micah with a group of people that she'd been working with for a number of years. And she later became a consultant until they translated it, and then she consulted them on the meaning of Micah.

She was also at the same time doing her PhD on the Book of Micah. So, she was studying in great detail the structure of Micah, the way it's put together, the

rhetorical functions, what God was trying to say through Micah, all those things. So they went through and translated it, and everything had been translated correctly.

And she said, do you understand what Micah's talking about? And they go, well, we wrote this little introduction, and they read the introduction. She said, okay, this is what I found in my research. This is an example of a court case where God is bringing charges against the nation of Israel, against Israel in the north, and against Judah in the south. And it's as if he's bringing them before the elders to try them in this court scene.

And he's trying them because they have been unfaithful to him like a wife can be unfaithful to her husband. And they said, really? We would not have gotten that unless you told us that. They said we need to rewrite the introduction.

And so, they rewrote the introduction. And then it ended up being like two or three pages long. But they said our people need to know this.

And when they read the introduction first, that then does the heavy lifting of orienting them to what's going on. When you read the Book of Micah, you have no idea when it was written. You have no idea who wrote it.

You have no idea what the circumstances were behind it, what motivated them to write it. You have no idea what the writer wanted the people to do differently. None of those things come out when you just jump in and read the Book of Micah.

But book introductions can do that in order to communicate and give them a frame of reference ahead of time. I remember when we were translating in the Orma language, we would get these book introductions, and they're long, and they're technical. And you're just going, gosh, how in the world can we translate this book introduction into Orma so that these people can understand it? As it turned out, my children had an NIV study Bible for children that had short book introductions.

They were concise, but they were also complete. And so I said, hey, can we translate this into Orma for a book introduction? And they go, yeah. And so that's what we did.

It's not that the Ormas are children. It's that the language that was used in a normal Bible is very, very difficult to translate. So translatability is a really important thing.

So, we got those book introductions. Okay, cross-references, as I said, correct grammar, as it were, see this word in the, but also, what do you do when you want them to look up another verse? You can't have C.F. Romans 5:17. What do you do? So we had to figure out a way to say that in a way, either look for or look at or



search. Then, the reference had to be clear: the book of Romans 5:17 or a reference to the Old Testament.

What do you do when you have a reference in the Old Testament but don't have the Old Testament? That's really hard, actually. Yeah, so the cross-references can help them, and then they can compare. For if you have a verse in Mark, that's also reflected in the other synoptic Gospels, like Matthew and Luke, then you can say, see Matthew here and Luke there.

That's a helpful thing, and so they can make use of the scriptures. That can be done in a footnote. Sometimes, it's done underneath a section heading, where they have the passage in Mark, and then in parentheses underneath the section heading, you have the Matthew and Luke passages and vice versa.

And again, section headings. Section headings can be another helpful tool. Section headings are very tricky.

I looked at the English Bible, and looking through Acts, I saw one that said, in Ephesus. Sorry, in Ephesus. What does that tell us about what's coming up in the text? Not a whole lot, actually.

I didn't get much out of that section heading. But the question is, does the section heading prepare them for what's coming up? Paul visits Exodus. Something like that would be more communicative.

So, we want communicative section headings. Also, what is the grammar of section headings? And often in English, we say, Paul visits, or Paul is visiting, or Paul...yeah. So, we put it in the present tense. In Orma, they prefer putting it in the past tense.

Paul visited Exodus at Ephesus. Again, things you don't think about, but we have to use the same translation principles of how we translated the text to produce the paratextual information as well. So, part and parcel of translating the Bible is translating the paratextual information that is necessary for the people to fill in the gaps.

You can use pictures. Usually, we don't put pictures within the Bible itself. It could be pictures in the back, pictures of the temple, pictures of Jerusalem, pictures of animals, things like that.

Maps. Maps can be okay. It depends on whether people think of an aerial view when they think of the world and how that map then ties into the reality that they see from the ground and look around this way.

So, maps, you have to see, is that something good that the people want? So these are just some of the paratextual information. There are probably others. In addition to the paratextual information, we have a whole category of materials called scriptural engagement material.

These are supplemental material outside the Bible, things you don't put within the cover of the New Testament or the whole Bible that help to inform people about the Bible and engage people about the Bible. And these are things that you and I have grown up with, and we don't even think about. Like what? Like booklets, Bible stories for children, and easy reading material.

Someone has to produce them. Therefore, producing them alongside the translation project is going to enhance people's understanding of the Bible and their interest in it. It draws them in so that they engage with the scriptures.

I was in church yesterday, and the pastor was talking about engaging and getting people in the church to read their Bibles. And he said, so I'm going to say it again, even though you get tired of me saying it over and over and over. Every pastor in America struggles with getting people to read their Bibles.

Scripture engagement material can draw them in and make them interested in reading the biblical text. Music, songs. You remember John Wesley was a preacher.

His brother Charles Wesley was a songwriter. A mighty fortress is our God. And in those early years when people weren't readers, we sang our theology.

So, the theology of the song taught us about the Bible. Another thing that Charles told John is that in 200 years, no one will remember one of your sermons, but everyone will remember my songs. And he's right.

So, he lived in, what, 1800s? And we still sing his songs today. So, music is another scripture engagement tool that we can encourage people to produce, which enhances their knowledge of scripture and their interest in it. Audio files.

You can have the Bible on an audio file. I've never thought about this, but what about if you had podcasts or radio pieces about the scriptures that are played on the public radio? It could be a discussion about the scriptures. It could be an explanation.

It could just simply be the scriptures in that local language. There are all kinds of possibilities. There is one application called the Scripture App Reader, where if you have the text in the local language on your phone, it will read it to you, and it will highlight the words as it goes across the words.

And so that's another way to get people engaged, the Scripture App Reader. Videos. The Jesus Film would be one of them.

People have made all kinds of different videos on biblical content, biblical themes, and biblical stories. Drama. Not only can you do videos, but you can have live performances that act out the scenes in the Bible.

Dance. Dance and music go together. And usually, these art forms, like drama, dance, music, and singing, are not mutually exclusive.

They all happen in a similar event. So if you are singing, you are also dancing, and you also have spoken words or things like that. So other cultures combine those things.

Do they sit and listen to music by themselves? They do now because we have recordings. And if you want to get people to read the Bible, put it on audio and intersperse Christian songs in there, and you'll sell out your audio. Artwork.

How many times have we seen artwork? Especially in the Middle Ages. Remember the Middle Ages, people weren't necessarily wide readers. And so, this is why you had paintings of the biblical scenes.

And these paintings then told the story. So, the Sistine Chapel, painted by Michelangelo, is the entire Bible from one end of the room to the other end of the room, from Genesis to Revelation. He painted the whole thing as a giant pictorial story of the Bible.

So that is an example of another type of artwork. There could be artwork in this culture. It may not be.

I don't know. But these are all just ideas of different things that we can produce to enhance people's understanding of the Scriptures. Other things, easy reading books.

There was a series done in the United Bible Societies that produced a series of readers who would take Bible stories that were used in a simple language, and then it got progressively more advanced in the reading level of the material. That's one thing. Literacy classes.

Having literacy classes in the church will help people learn how to read. And then, when they learn how to read, they learn how to read the Scriptures. Those things can be done.

Bible studies. Why not? Bible studies are one type of Scripture engagement. And so you have a Bible study material that's written out, and then groups can get together, and they can study the Scriptures together.

In some places where people may not be as they're pre-literate, you can still play a recording of a particular passage and sit around and talk about it. And these listening groups are very, very popular, even in areas where the Scriptures are new and even in areas where the people are not yet Christians. And so, in playing this audio for a group of Muslim people or a group of Hindu people, they can sit and engage with the Scriptures in a safe way without being seen as people who are then betraying their people, betraying their culture, and betraying their religion.

You can have books on the Bible culture. You can have a book with pictures. This is the temple, and then you can have an explanation of the temple.

This is what the altar looks like, and this is what they did with the altar. This is what a camel looks like. So, you can have these booklets that are freestanding that people can then engage with.

And now, with everything being digital, you can even put stuff like that on your phone. Hallelujah. But somehow, it needs to happen, right? Each of these pieces of Scripture engagement is aimed at a particular sub-grouping of the culture, a particular target audience in that community.

It could be adults. It could be children. It could be men and fathers.

It could be mothers and women. It could be for Christian people. It could be geared toward people who are not believers.

All of that goes into why you want to make this particular piece. What are you going to do with it? And who is it for? So, we aim to use our Scripture engagement material specifically for those people. Every culture, including ours, needs Scripture engagement materials in order to effectively engage with the biblical content, especially people who have not reached yet, especially unreached people groups. And it needs to be a part of the whole Bible translation project.

It has to be a part of the ethos. Many times in the early years, we didn't think about Scripture engagement. We thought about how we needed to get the Bible done.

When I was working at ORMA, my goal was to translate the Scriptures into ORMA. And it was me and my wife. And my wife was taking care of the family, and so basically, it was me.

So, if I had a choice between Scripture engagement and Scripture, Scripture took precedent for obvious reasons. But now, the form of Bible Agencies International, FOBI, has come up with a statement that says people need Scripture engagement materials. They need oral translation.

They need audio. They need visuals. And this should be a part of every translation program.

And so that is now a thing that's common in Bible translation circles around the world. And so you might ask, what Scripture engagement materials have you produced so far? Well, we've done X, Y, and Z. Or they might say, you know, we haven't had a chance to yet, but we really want to do this for this group of people and that for those. So we see that the biblical text plus para-text plus Scripture engagement is necessary for a fuller and more complete understanding of the Scriptures in order to fill in those communication gaps that we struggle with when we come to translate the Bible.

When should you produce these Scripture engagement materials? That's a really good question. So, planning the timing of it. In some places, especially in unreached people groups, you might do the Scripture engagement material before the translation starts.

I learned of one project. The SAL team went to work in this particular area in Asia, and there was already someone there working on the translation. And so, they said, great, we will help that person.

And that person wasn't really interested in having help. Okay, so they were there for X number of years already, a year or two, learning the language and everything. But now that they weren't engaged with the translation of the New Testament.

So, they said, okay, let's work on the Old Testament. And unfortunately, another agency was doing that. And they said, we have our people, thanks, but we don't need your help.

So, they weren't really allowed to engage in that. Gosh, what do we do? They also talked to the translation people with whom they worked. And they thought, well, maybe we should do some Scripture engagement stuff.

And so, they had the text that was produced in the New Testament. But people have not engaged with it yet. They didn't; it was too foreign and too strange.

And so, I saw this video of this song that they did in traditional musical style. And it was like an ode, and it was telling a story. And the story was about Jesus.

Not only did they sing, but they had a specific way of dancing. And there was a line of people, and they were dancing, and singing, and dancing, and singing about this wonderful King that we have, the King of glory, who has come to save us, this King who wants to help us, that wants to bless us. When people hear that, who is this king

you're talking about? Who is this Jesus that you mentioned in your song? And it drew them in.

And then they were interested, well, where did you get this? Well, we got it from the Bible. And it connected them. Then, the church started to take off because of the material of Scripture engagement.

So, for Scripture engagement, there's not a time for it to be done. And sometimes the people aren't ready for it. But it has to be something that we intentionally plan to do.

And it has to be something that we intentionally do. Intentionality is one of my favorite words. Nothing happens in my life unless I put it on my to-do list.

And if it's on my to-do list, at some point in time, I'll get to it because I see it on my wall. On that sticky note, I'm thinking, dang, I haven't done that yet. It has to be intentional, and it has to be carried out.

It has to be followed through. But we don't want to do this just because it should be done. We want to do it because we value the contribution that the paratextual and Scripture engagement materials add to the message that God has for the people so that God can speak directly to them.

That's what it's all about. Not only effective communication in the target language but also making it possible for God to speak directly to the people in a meaningful way, in a way that's impactful, in a way that draws them in so that their lives can change and so that they can then have a deeper, more intimate relationship with God.

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