

# **Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Transmission and Translation, Genesis 1**

## **Session 4, 6-min. Video Overview**

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You know, when you pick up a Bible, have you ever really stopped to think about the incredible journey it's taken to get to you? We're talking about a story that spans millennia, from the mind of an ancient prophet all the way into your hands. It's a wild tale of preservation, deep scholarship, and some really tough choices. So how in the world does a message, first spoken thousands of years ago in languages most of us have never heard of, actually survive? I mean, it's not magic, right? It's a very deliberate, very human process.

And understanding that process, well, that's the key to understanding the message itself. Okay, so this whole journey basically breaks down into four big steps. First, you've got inspiration.

That's when the original message is given. Then there's canonization, where different communities decided which books were the authoritative ones. After that comes transmission, the painstaking, centuries-long process of copying these texts by hand.

And finally, we get to the last step, and maybe the most complex one of all, translation. Yeah, that last stage, translation. This is where things get really tricky.

It's so much more than just swapping one word for another. Translators are faced with this fundamental dilemma, a core question about what exactly they're trying to carry over from one language to the next. See, every single translator, every translation committee, has to pick a philosophy.

Are you trying to bring over the exact, literal words? Or are you trying to bring over the original meaning and its impact? And as you're about to see, those two goals can often pull in completely opposite directions. So on one side of the ring, you have the word-for-word, or literal, approach. The whole goal here is precision.

It aims to be as faithful as possible to the original vocabulary and even the sentence structure. But, you know, languages just don't line up perfectly, so this approach can sometimes come across as a little, well, wooden or awkward. And on the other side? That's what we call dynamic equivalence, or meaning-for-meaning.

Here, the goal is totally different. It's to create the same effect, the same feeling, in today's reader that the original text had on its first audience. It's way more readable, for sure, but it means the translator has to act a lot more like an interpreter.

Okay, theory is one thing, but the best way to really get this is to see it in action. So let's do a little case study. We're going to take one single verse from the Book of Proverbs and see how five very different translations handle it.

And you're going to see how these theories create completely different reading experiences. Now, what's really interesting here is something you can't see in English, but you can definitely hear. Listen to the original Hebrew.

Oger bekaitz nirdam bakatzir. You hear that? That rhythmic, rhyming sound? That musical quality is one of the very first things that gets lost in translation. There's just no perfect way to carry that sound play over.

Let's start with the classic, the King James Version from way back in 1611. This thing is a titan of English literature, and it's a perfect example of that more formal word-for-word approach. The structure is incredibly close to the original Hebrew.

But you feel the challenge immediately, don't you? Words like gathereth and sleepeth, they have a certain poetic beauty, for sure. But they definitely sound dated. This language is over 400 years old.

And while you can figure out what it means, it's a long way from how any of us actually talk today. OK, let's jump forward a few hundred years to the New International Version, or NIV, which is super popular today. The NIV tries to find a balance.

The language is updated, gathers instead of gathereth. But notice they added one small interpretive word, crops. That's right.

The word crops is nowhere to be found in the original Hebrew text. So why add it? Well, think about it. In an ancient farming culture, if you said someone gathers in summer, everybody knew you meant crops.

For us, we might ask, gathers what? Rocks? Flowers? The NIV translators added that word for clarity, to make the implied meaning explicit for us. Now we take a big leap over to the New Living Translation, which leans heavily into that meaning-for-meaning camp. Notice two huge changes.

First, the farming metaphor? It's completely gone. Instead of gathering crops, it gives us the underlying principle: work hard. Second, son becomes the gender-neutral youth.

The goal here isn't to preserve the original image, but to state the timeless principle as directly as possible. And this? This is the far end of the spectrum. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*, isn't even trying to be a direct translation.

He takes the core idea, sees your opportunities, and just recasts it in a punchy, modern idiom that we all get instantly. It hits you right between the eyes. So let's put it all together.

You go from the KJV's formal elegance, to the NIV adding a word for clarity, to the NLT focusing on the direct meaning, all the way to *The Message*'s modern punch. You can really see how each version's philosophy totally shapes the final text. There's no single right way.

Each one is just a different window into the original idea. But you know, translation isn't just about philosophy. It's also about human knowledge, which is constantly growing and changing.

Sometimes, translators are just doing the absolute best they can with the information they have at the time. Here's a perfect example from the King James Version. It describes something as being like a pot shirt covered with silver dross.

Okay, a pot shirt is just a piece of broken pottery. But silver dross? That's the impurity, the scum, the garbage you skim off molten silver. So why would anyone cover a piece of pottery with garbage? It's a real puzzle.

And here is the solution to the puzzle. Back in 1611, the KJV translators found a Hebrew word that's only used this one time in the whole Bible. They made their best educated guess.

But then, in 1948, archaeologists discovered texts in a language called Ugaritic, a sister language to Hebrew. And in those texts, that mystery word clearly meant glaze. The proverb is about a cheap clay pot covered with a pretty glaze to make it look valuable, like putting lipstick on a pig.

The KJV translators weren't wrong. They were just working 300 years before a key archaeological discovery. This whole story reveals a fundamental truth.

The entire process, from ancient scribes to modern scholars, has been carried out by dedicated, brilliant, but ultimately fallible human beings. They didn't make mistakes because they were careless, but simply because they were human. So what does all this mean for us, the people reading it today? If the process isn't perfect, can we trust the result? Well, this is where we need to make a really critical distinction.

We have to separate the idea of a perfect, original message, what theologians call divine inspiration, from the flawed, human process of copying and translating it over thousands of years. The message is one thing; the delivery system is something else entirely. And here's the amazing part.

Thanks to finds like those Ugaritic texts, better manuscripts, and just more sophisticated translation theories, scholars today are in a better position to understand the original text than at any point in over 2,000 years. How cool is that? Ultimately, seeing the human element in all of this doesn't weaken the text; I think it actually invites us to engage with it more deeply. The goal isn't to worship a perfect, leather-bound object, but to wrestle with the meaning of a message that was preserved through imperfect people, for imperfect people, for people like us.

Which leaves us with a final thought to chew on. If the human process of preserving this text has never been perfect, maybe that suggests the true, divine message was never meant to be found just in the ink on the page, but in the meaning that shines right through it.