



Choosing a Bible with Help from Martin Luther

KRISTOFER PHAN COFFMAN

In response to the question “What’s the best Bible translation?,” my former Hebrew professor, Mark Throntveit, once quipped, “The one that you’ll read.”¹ As a Lutheran and as someone from a missionary family, the answer delighted me. On the Lutheran level, it speaks to the reality that God’s word lives and can do its work apart from human cleverness or skill. Because God’s Word is, above all, Jesus Christ himself, every translation can help to call the sinner to repentance and preach the good news of the gospel. God’s word does not return void (Isa 55:11), even if it goes out in a translation that lacks elegance or learning. From a missionary standpoint, God’s promise to speak even in inelegant translation is a good thing indeed. In very few instances do missionaries begin to preach with a translation by a team of scholars in hand. The work of preaching begins instead with translations that stumble their way into a new language, seeking to sing the song of the Lord in a strange land (Ps 137:4). Throughout Christian history, these stumbling translations have borne much fruit.

In the United States in 2022, however, we are spoiled by choice. We have translations that stumble and translations that speak the gospel in Shakespearean

¹ “The Best Way to Read the Bible,” *Enter the Bible Podcast* 1.45, March 1, 2015.

Of all the elements of biblical translation and reading, more attention must be paid to syntax (“the arrangement of words and phrases in a language”). Syntax describes the patterns and assumptions of the language of a text, the overall patterns that guide the arrangement of words and phrases. Languages are cultural systems, and to read the Bible one needs to know its system.

rhythms and everything in between. Thus, we might press Dr. Throntveit's advice a little further, and instead of "What's the best Bible translation?" we might nuance our question and ask: How do we evaluate Bible translations for reading? We might have a further set of questions too: What if we need not just to read the Bible but to preach, teach, and worship with the words of a translation? Which Bible should we choose then? A comprehensive answer to all these questions would take a series of books, and rather than buzzing through many different aspects of translation, I'd like to draw attention to one area in particular. Drawing on my experience as a teacher of New Testament Greek as well as a professional translator and translation consultant, I want to highlight the role of *syntax* in biblical translation. I begin this article by going back to Martin Luther's German Bible in order to show that his theorizing on syntax laid the groundwork for his innovations in translating. I argue that modern Bible translations still have much to learn from Luther, and in the second half of the article, I take a practical turn. By looking at two different modern translations, one that emphasizes the importance of syntax and one that does not, I show that a focus on syntax can be understood as an act of love for the average reader.

MARTIN LUTHER AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SYNTAX

As someone who has taught New Testament Greek for a number of years, I have noticed that students tend to be intrigued the most by Greek vocabulary. There is the myth that Greek as a language has a multitude of subtle distinctions between words (e.g., *agape* vs. *eros* vs. *philos*) and that as translators and exegetes, we have to figure out the perfect equivalents or circumlocutions to get those distinctions across to our audience. The mysteries of syntax, however, tend to cause students to despair. *Syntax* refers to the arrangement of words and phrases in a language. It requires a move from the one-to-one correlation of looking up words in a dictionary toward an appreciation for the systems that make up a language's modes of expression. Unfortunately, the ways in which the biblical authors arrange words and clauses do not always spark the same kind of theological excitement as vocabulary.

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Resources that discuss Luther's German Bible often mislead students through the same overemphasis on word choice. One of the quotes repeated *ad nauseam* from Luther's 1530 open letter *On Translating* is his contention that "Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the

common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their *language*, the *way they speak*, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.”² Commentators have often used this quotation to place an emphasis on “colloquial” vocabulary, but Luther’s choice of emphasis (“their language,” “the way they speak”) reveals that he has syntax in mind.³ In the following section, I begin by providing an in-depth look at Luther’s translation of Romans 3:28 to illustrate his concern for syntax. I then discuss two dimensions of his translation that flowed out of his syntactical theorizing, namely style and vocabulary. I conclude this section with a reflection on the continued relevance of Luther and the way in which love for syntax flows into love of the text and love for the reader.

SYNTAX ALONE

One source of controversy around Luther’s New Testament was his addition of the word *allein* (“only”) to Romans 3:28: *allein durch den Glauben* (“through faith only”). Luther’s detractors (as well as misinterpreters who have sought to defend him) have seen the addition of *allein* as an effort by Luther to emphasize the doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone). This line of reasoning caused Luther much amusement. In his discussion of Romans 3:28 in *On Translating*, he begins by poking fun at his critics, pointing out that the proper translation of *allein* into Latin is not *sola* but *solum*; that is, he had written *solum fide*, “only faith,” not *sola fide*, “by faith alone.” He continues to make the serious translation point that he added *allein* to meet the demands of German syntax.⁴ For English speakers, this point needs elaboration: In English (just as in Koine Greek), we don’t need to add “alone” or “only” when drawing a contrast; it sounds natural to our ears to say, “I cooked the pizza on the grill, without using the oven.” We could add “only” for emphasis (“I cooked the pizza on the grill *only*, without using the oven”), but it is not necessary and sounds stilted. As Luther argues, however, in German the “*allein/only*” is mandatory; his translation would have been stilted without it. In German, the phrase *ohne des Gesetzes Werke*, “without the works of the Law,” requires an accompanying phrase with *allein*, in this case *allein durch den Glauben*, “only through faith.” These differences in syntax are often the hardest to render in translation because syntax requires thorough knowledge of the rhythms of both the ancient language and the target language. Further, concern for preserving the wording of the ancient language can cause translators to contort the rules of the language into which they are translating. Though the respect for the ancient text is laudable, when the target language is forced into the syntax of the ancient language, great difficulty in

² Martin Luther, *On Translating: An Open Letter* (1530), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–) 35:189. Hereafter, cited as *LW*. Italics mine.

³ Birgit Stolt also makes this point with reference to Luther’s preference for concrete imagery. Birgit Stolt, “Luther’s Translation of the Bible,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 28 (2014): 379.

⁴ *LW* 35:188–89.

understanding can result. As one example, the practice of rendering the second petition of the Lord's Prayer with unnatural English syntax—"Hallowed be thy name/Your name be holy"—leads many (even those who have been churchgoers their entire life) to understand the phrase as a simple statement, "Holy is your name," rather than a petition prayed to God, "Make your name holy." Luther's insight that "we must be guided by their *language*, the *way they speak*, and do our translating accordingly" points us toward the reality that his emphasis on syntax was out of concern for understanding among people who did not have the luxury of academic learning. If the Holy Spirit spoke in German, it would have to be fluent German, and the same point can be made for English.

Syntax Leads to Style

A concern for syntax, however, extends beyond simply translating intelligibly. The ordering of words and clauses is also a chief component of the style of a text. When it came to style, Luther ruminated on multiple levels of expression, including genre, vocabulary, and the effect of the individual speaker. In terms of genre, Luther urged translators to consider whether the style of the text helped to convey its message.⁵ The Psalms present an obvious example of this, but another that Luther identified was the *vav*-consecutive style of Old Testament narrative. In this style, the Old Testament authors signaled that they were telling a historical narrative by repeated use of the conjunction *vav* followed by the imperfect tense of the Hebrew verb. In cases where genre played a role in the message, Luther stuck closely to the conventions of the Hebrew.⁶ Though the repeated use of "and" as a translation for *vav* sounds repetitive to a German or an English ear, Luther wanted to distinguish these historical narratives from other biblical texts, and he was willing to introduce a foreign style to do so with the understanding that his departure did not hinder the fluency of his translation.

The concern for the style of the text flowed into Luther's thoughts on vocabulary. Where a text signaled that elevated, religious language was in order (e.g., the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai), Luther followed suit. However, Luther realized that many portions of the biblical text had acquired their "religious" flavor only through repetition. The texts themselves often were written in colloquial and informal language, but had been elevated over time through their use in worship and devotion. For instance, in Luke 1:28, Luther refused to translate the angel Gabriel's greeting as "full of grace" because he recognized that this represented an artificial construct. The angel, as he argued, simply wanted to greet Mary and, as Luther jokes at the end of his discussion, he really should have translated the greeting as "Hello there, Mary."⁷

⁵ Martin Luther, "Defense of the Translation of the Psalms (1531)," in LW 35:216.

⁶ Stolt, "Luther's Translation of the Bible," 388.

⁷ LW 35:192-93.

Luther arrived at his conclusions regarding the angelic greeting through a study of the different ways in which angels speak throughout the biblical corpus. In other words, he realized that words cannot be translated in a vacuum; a translator must consider the usage and the style of the speaker. In modern linguistics, we now call the study of how individuals speak “idiolect.” Idiolect is a more specific category than dialect, and it helps to give individual authors and speakers their voice. Rather than flattening out differences in a translation so that the whole Bible sounds consistent, Luther understood that the Bible itself contains a multitude of voices and that syntax of each individual genre and speaker should be respected and reflected in the translation.

Syntax Speaks to the Heart

On a pragmatic level, Luther’s writings abound with references to the difficulties of translation, and so his thoughts on syntax represent a ready-made entry point for our own reflections. Rather than starting from scratch, we can make use of the time that he took to reflect on the difficulty of making ancient languages speak in a modern idiom and the ways that context influences both word choice and style.⁸ Just as Luther knew that pairs such as law/gospel or saint/sinner do not represent easy divisions, but rather dynamic states of being, he saw that translating requires a constant back-and-forth between the two languages in question and an appreciation for the nuances of syntax in each. If we take nothing else from Luther’s wrestling, we will profit if he helps us to realize that Schleiermacher’s assertion that “either the translator leaves the author alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the author, or the translator leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the author toward the reader” represents a flawed understanding of language.⁹ That formulation, though continually repeated, obscures the dynamic process of translation and the fact that no translator can actually “leave the reader or the author alone.”

The reference to Schleiermacher’s outdated thoughts on translation reveals the continued relevance of Luther’s theorizing on syntax. As the science of translation has advanced, our appreciation of the genius of Luther as a translator has likewise increased. Traditionally, scholars have lauded Luther’s translation for its literary art and its influence on the development of the German language. Both facets of his German Bible merit reflection, but they also represent secondary aspects of his advances as a translator. If Luther had only produced a beautiful or an influential translation, he might be someone to emulate, but not someone to take translation advice from. The wonder in Luther’s translation, as gathered from reflections on the subject, lies in the sophistication of his theorizing. In wrestling

⁸ It may seem odd to the reader to consider 1500s German as a “modern” idiom, but in terms of linguistic development, Luther’s German has much more in common with German from the 2000s than it does with that of the 1000s.

⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, quoted in Stolt, “Luther’s Translation of the Bible,” 377.

with the biblical text and seeking to make it “speak German,” Luther formulated a theory of syntax that anticipated the conclusions of modern linguistic science nearly half a millennium in advance.¹⁰ Here I am not speaking just about Luther’s advances in *Bible* translation, but about his advances in translation in *general*. In fundamental ways, the science of translation only began to catch up to Luther over the last fifty years, and in some areas, such as the translation of metaphor, he still stands ahead of the field.¹¹ Any practitioner five hundred years ahead of their time deserves attention, and the fact that Luther made his advances in thinking about the practical use of the Bible make him an appropriate partner for this conversation.

The wonder in Luther’s translation, as gathered from reflections on the subject, lies in the sophistication of his theorizing. In wrestling with the biblical text and seeking to make it “speak German,” Luther formulated a theory of syntax that anticipated the conclusions of modern linguistic science nearly half a millennium in advance.

Further, it is not just that Luther anticipated modern linguistics; rather, he still stands far ahead of us. We see this especially in Luther’s contention that translation ought to come from and speak to the heart. Many modern translators still hold to the Enlightenment fascination with objectivity and critical distance.¹² This is seen in Schleiermacher’s formulation, in which he envisions the text and the audience as chess pieces that the translator has mastery over. What Luther intuited and what we are coming to realize is that translators always bring themselves into a text; translation is too much of an art for any other method, and an audience embraces or rejects a translation on more levels than just the cognitive. Rather than objectivity, the future of biblical translation involves exactly what Luther demonstrated: translators with an intimate and personal relationship to the biblical text. Out of their love for the biblical text, these translators will take the time to understand the ancient syntax, and out of love for their modern readers, they will take the time to make the text speak fluent English or German or whichever language they are translating into.

¹⁰ “In his pragmatic method of translating, with its concern for the contextual situation, personal idiom (the archangel ‘Gabriel’s way of speaking’) and speech rituals, as well as his taking into account ‘language’ as ‘address’ or system and the distinction between meaning, signifier and sense, he stands at the very pinnacle of linguistics and the field of translation of our own day.” Stolt, 384.

¹¹ “Neither in theory nor in praxis has anyone advanced beyond Luther in solving this problem [i.e. translating Hebrew metaphors].” Stolt, 384.

¹² Stolt, 388.

TWO CASE STUDIES IN SYNTAX IN MODERN TRANSLATION

Before turning to the two case studies in modern translations, it is important for me to reiterate that these are not evaluations of the translations as a whole. Here we are interested simply in their treatment of English syntax and the resulting effects on understanding for the average reader. There are many other criteria to evaluate a translation on, and the two translations in question have merits and faults beyond their concern for syntax.

The New Revised Standard Version

In many ways, the NRSV represents the epitome of Enlightenment biblical translation. It is a translation that demonstrates immense learning and that endeavors to “move the reader toward the author.” It has enjoyed prestige as a translation on account of its background in cultural Protestantism and boasts the backing of the elite academics in the Society of Biblical Literature. A look under the hood, however, reveals that in terms of syntax, the NRSV is working with a carburetor in a fuel-injected world.

The first and most important aspect of the NRSV to note is that it is not really a translation. As its name indicates, it is a new edition of the Revised Standard Version, which itself is a revision of the King James Bible (the “Authorized” Version).¹³ Its status as a revision comes with both strengths and weaknesses. On the strengths side, it retains many of the rhythms and wordings that made the King James Bible so influential in the formation of the English language. To many churchgoers, the NRSV just sounds biblical. There is, of course, a mutually reinforcing effect going on here: the King James helped to form the English language, especially within the formal, religious sphere, and so the NRSV resonates in that atmosphere. The chief weakness of its status as a revision is that it retains oddities of syntax that can make it a difficult translation for non-academics to read. The oddities in syntax come about, first of all, because the King James Version was meant to mirror the word order of the ancient languages as much as possible. There is also simply the fact that four hundred years have passed since the translation of the King James Bible, and English has changed in that time.

Matthew 12 presents two examples of these difficulties in syntax, one from Greek and one from archaic English. In Matthew 12:33 the NRSV renders the first part of the verse as “Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad.” Leaving aside the vocabulary choice (i.e., we do not “make” trees in modern English), the NRSV has trouble dealing with a key aspect of ancient Greek syntax here. Ancient Greek permits ellipsis, where the Greek author leaves words and phrases out for his audience to fill in. In this case, the full thought is something along the lines of “Nurture a good tree and [it will produce] good fruit.” English syntax does not allow this kind of elliptical expression, and

¹³ The acronym has recently grown longer, as an updated edition (NRSVue) debuted in May 2022.

as the NRSV has rendered it, a reader would take both the tree and the fruit as the object of “make.” The NRSV translator knew that this was not the case, but they awkwardly tried to solve the difficulty by putting a comma before the “and.” They intended the comma to indicate that each clause should be understood as a full sentence, but that demands far too much of the average reader.

Seven verses later, in Matthew 12:40, the NRSV displays an example of odd syntax derived from a faulty revision of the King James and *not* from the Greek. In the NRSV the verse reads “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.” If the NRSV actually followed the structure of the Greek, the verse would be translated “for just as Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.” In Greek it is a parallel construction, with “for three days and three nights” coming at the end of both clauses. The translators of the King James moved that phrase to the beginning of both clauses, but kept them parallel. In addition, in 1611, it was not necessary for them to use the word “for” before expressions for the duration of time. For whatever reason, the reviser moved the second “three days and three nights” to the beginning of the clause and added the word “for,” but left the other one untouched.

Neither of these difficulties in syntax makes the NRSV indecipherable, but they place extra demands on the reader, and as illustrated in the second example, they often have nothing to do with the Greek text. The NRSV abounds with these syntactical oddities, and I believe that Luther would have shaken his head at this awkward attempt to speak Hebrew and Greek instead of plain English. The NRSV is a translation that shows great love for the ancient languages and the academic tradition of biblical study, but it does not welcome the reader outside of that tradition with open arms.

First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the NRSV is the First Nations Version (FNV) published in 2021. While the NRSV focuses on preserving the English translation heritage that dates back to the King James, the FNV seeks to subvert that tradition and to translate for the specific context of English-speaking First Nations people. As the dedication puts it, “It is our hope that the colonial language that was forced upon us can now serve our people in a good way, by presenting Creator Sets Free (Jesus) in a more culturally relevant context.”¹⁴

At the heart of the FNV is the realization that English is not a monolithic language and that English syntax differs depending on the background of the reader. The FNV seeks to translate in the syntax of a specific group—namely, First Nations people who speak English but who “still resonate with the cultural and

¹⁴ Terry M. Wildman, “Dedication,” *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2021).

linguistic thought patterns found in their original tongues.”¹⁵ The resulting translation emphasizes simple language and sentence structure that does not require academic training to understand.

The ways in which the FNV treats Matthew 12:33 and 12:40 reveal its differences in philosophy from the NRSV. In Matthew 12:33, the FNV translates, “You must grow a good tree to get good fruit. If you grow a bad tree, you get bad fruit.” To achieve their translation, the FNV had to make several choices: First of all, they expanded the Greek ellipsis, inserting the verb “to get” in the second half of each sentence. They also chose to render the main verb in the sentence as “you must grow.” The latter choice shows the way in which understanding syntax allows for a more accessible translation. The Greek of Matthew 12:33 features an aorist imperative as the main verb (ποιήσατε), and the NRSV translated it literally as the command “make.” The context within Jesus’s teaching shows, however, that this is an example of what we call the gnomic aorist. Gnostic aorists are not aorists used by garden gnomes! Rather, they are the way that proverbs are expressed in Greek. Jesus is, of course, not giving horticultural advice but talking proverbially about good and bad deeds. Acknowledging this, the translators of the FNV decided that within their context, “you must grow” was the proper way to render a proverb. This translation shows respect both for the ancient syntax and for the modern English syntax, and results in phrasing that is understandable to any reader.

The same concern for the understanding of the reader can be seen in the FNV translation of Matthew 12:40: “Just as he was in the belly of a great fish for three days and nights, the True Human Being will be in the womb of the earth for three days and nights.” First of all, this translation avoids the awkward syntax of the time expression in the NRSV, placing “for three days and nights” in parallel position at the end of both clauses. In addition, there is the interesting use of the phrase “womb of the earth” instead of “heart of the earth.” The language of metaphor, just like that of proverbs, is culturally conditioned, and in this case, the FNV translators decided that “heart” did not carry the proper resonance within their communities. The choice of “womb” is an apt metaphor in light of the Greek use of “heart” to mean “the center and source of physical life.”¹⁶ This is an example of the way in which a translation can “preach.” The usual English expression “heart of the earth” places the emphasis on depth and interiority. “Womb of the earth,” with its resonances of birth and new life, ties Jesus’s pronouncement to his resurrection and his status as firstborn from the dead. It would be interesting to know as well whether the translators also intended “womb of the earth” to resonate with Hopi and Zuni creation traditions wherein the first people emerged out of the earth.

Unlike the NRSV, the FNV seeks to meet its readers, easing the burden of translation on them. That said, it’s important to note that the FNV seeks to ease the burden on a specific set of readers. Though its straightforward language is

¹⁵ Wildman, “Introduction to the First Nations Version,” *First Nations Version*, ix.

¹⁶ “καρδία,” in Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

accessible to most English speakers, its choice of cultural context means that words and phrasing may not resonate with or may even be misunderstood by those outside of its intended audience.

CONCLUSION

Though syntax may not strike up enthusiasm for many readers, I have tried to show that it has great importance for the intelligibility of biblical translations. Most importantly, by considering syntax, I have shown that there is no such thing as the “best Bible translation.” Rather, every Bible translation comes with the question “For whom is this translation intended?” It is important to reflect on whether we rely too often on crutches and half-truths such as Bibles labeled “most academic translation” or “most accurate translation” when evaluating whether a translation is appropriate for our given contexts. Most important for me in this reflection has been the realization that attention to syntax in translation is an avenue for us to express our love and care for each other. By doing the hard work of making translations accessible and specific to different contexts, we show that the God who speaks in the Bible does not only whisper in the ears of academics. ⊕

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