High Peaks Bible Fellowship

Basic Bible Interpretation:
Understanding the Language of the Bible

Gaps Between Us and the Biblical Writers

- Our goal in Bible interpretation is to come as close as possible to the intended meaning of the biblical author, but we must realize that there are several "gaps" between us and the original writers.

1. <u>Time Gap</u>: there is a time gap of hundreds or thousands of years between us and the original writers of the Scriptures.
2. <u>Distance Gap</u>: there is a gap of hundreds or thousands of miles between us and the foreign countries where the events of the Bible happened.
3. <u>Culture Gap</u>: there is a wide difference between how we live today and how people lived and acted in the societies of the original writers.
4. <u>Language Gap</u>: there is a great difference between the way we speak and write today compared with how people spoke and wrote during the time of the original writers.

- Look at this text and see if you can interpret it:

    *Do, carodd Duw y byd gymaint nes iddo roi ei unig Fab, er mwyn i bob
    un sy'n credu ynddo ef beidio â mynd i ddistryw ond cael bywyd tragwyddol.*[1]
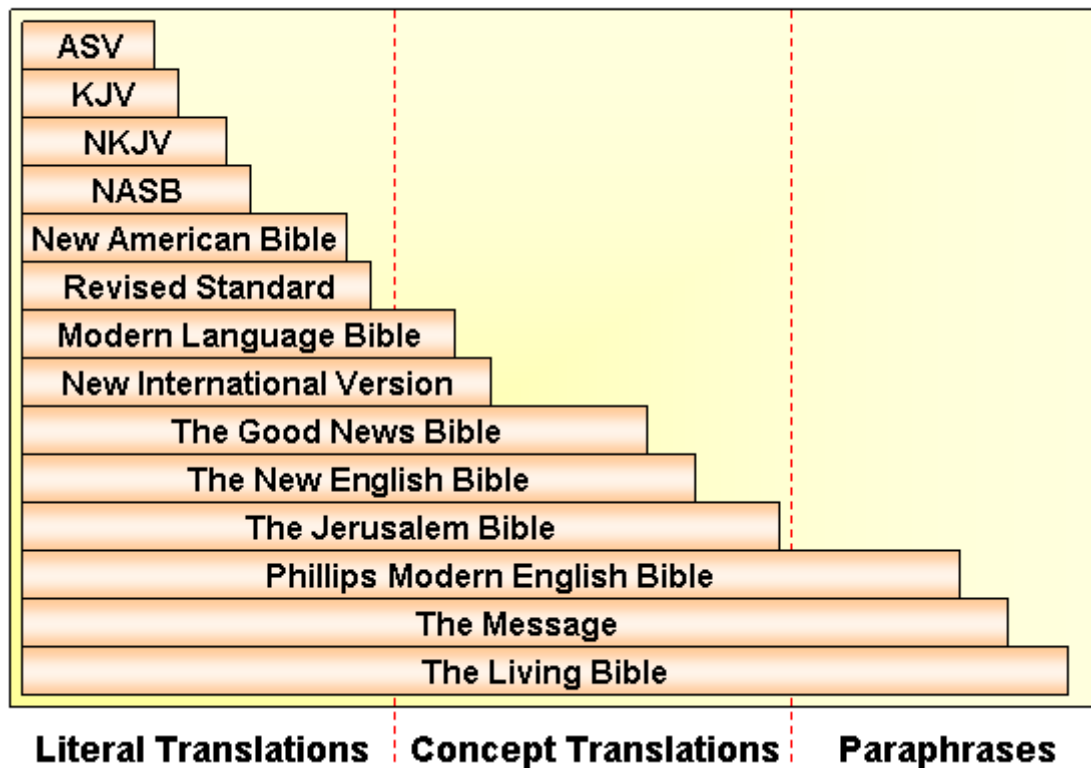
- If you want to know what these words say you can either
  (1) learn the original language, or
  (2) ask someone who already knows this language to translate it for you.

  This is what we also do with the written Scriptures, since they were originally recorded in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages.

Interpret the Bible? *Which* Bible?

- Since our goal is to come as close as possible to the intended meaning of the biblical author, how can we determine which of the available English Bible versions is a close rendering of the words that the biblical writers actually recorded? Unfortunately the process of <u>translation</u> almost always involves some degree of <u>interpretation</u>, which may introduce distortions of the original author's intended meaning.

- Studies have been done to classify different Bible versions according to how "literally" they render the words of the original biblical authors. "Word-for-word" translations come closest to the original text, but the resulting English may not be very readable. "Concept-for-concept" translations are more readable in English, but they may take some liberties with the original intention of the author. "Paraphrase" translations are *very* readable in English, but they usually render the original text in modern idioms or slang that often express meanings different from those intended by the original author.

- The following chart ranks several different versions of the English Bible according to their translation style.

Comparison of English Bible Translations

Literal Translations	Concept Translations	Paraphrases
ASV		
KJV		
NKJV		
NASB		
New American Bible		
Revised Standard		
Modern Language Bible		
New International Version		
The Good News Bible		
The New English Bible		
The Jerusalem Bible		
Phillips Modern English Bible		
The Message		
The Living Bible		

- For the purpose of <u>studying</u> and <u>interpreting</u> the Bible, it is best to select one of the top four English translations that are more literal in their rendering of what the biblical author has recorded.

Interpreting the Language of Scripture

The more skilled we become in using and interpreting language of all kinds, the more useful we can be to God and others in every area of life that involves communication. "True language consciousness on the part of the interpreter is essential. To develop this in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) is very rewarding. But if one cannot study the original languages, then a language awareness in English will help the interpreter to escape many pitfalls and to lay hold of many truths which he might otherwise pass by."[2]

Understanding the Meanings of Words (Lexicology)

- We must remember that a word can only mean one thing at a time. Therefore, when a biblical writer uses a word, we should make every effort to determine that single intended meaning.
- In order to do this, we first need to know the possible *range* of meanings that the specific word might have. Dictionaries (lexicons) and other word study tools can be very helpful in describing the variety of meanings for particular words. "To say that there is a range of meaning does not mean that one can identify the whole range and then pick the meaning that best suits what he would like the author to have said. No, the author had a very specific meaning in mind. If God the Holy Spirit took the care to inspire the very words, we must be careful to search out the intent of the author in his choice of words."[3]

- We also must know the factors that affect the meaning of words:

1. Word Origin (etymology) = what is the original root meaning of the word? Etymology may provide a useful word picture to aid our understanding, but it can also be misleading. Etymology does not tell us as much about the *meaning* of a word as it does about the *history* of a word.
2. Word Usage = the meanings of words are established by their common usage during the time of the writer.
3. Context = the specific meaning of a word is always determined by its use in a particular context.

- The more skill you have with the original languages of the Bible, the more tools become accessible to study those languages. "It is possible to do a competent word study without a working knowledge of the original languages. However, if the serious student can quickly learn both the Hebrew and Greek alphabets and their standard transliterations into English, he is then equipped to use more concordances, dictionaries, and commentaries."[4]

Understanding the Relationships of Words (Syntax)

- We must understand the basic parts of speech and how they function in sentences.

1. Identifying *nouns* will help us see the subjects and objects in sentences, and identifying *adjectives* will show us how these nouns are being described.
2. Identifying *verbs* will show us what action is being expressed in sentences, and identifying *adverbs* will help us see how this action is occurring.
3. Identifying *prepositions* and connecting words *(conjunctions)* will show us how the ideas in the sentences are connected to form a complete thought.
4. Connecting words *(conjunctions)* are often important in understanding the flow of thought in a passage, because they indicate the relationships between the ideas that they link together. Here are several conjunctions and the type of relationships they indicate:

Relationship	Conjunction or Connecting Word(s)
CAUSE / REASON	Because, For this reason, Since, That
COMPARISON	As, Also, Just as, Like, Likewise, More, More than, So as, So also, Too
CONDITIONAL	If
CONTINUATION	And, Either, Neither, Nor, Or
CONTRAST	Although, But, Except, Even though, However, Much more, Nevertheless, Only, Otherwise, Whereas, Yet
EMPHASIS	Indeed, Only
EXPLANATION	For, Now
LOCATION / POSITION	At, In, On, Over, Where, Wherever
PURPOSE / RESULT	For this purpose, In order that, So that, That, Then, Therefore, Thus
TIME	After, As, Before, Now, Then, Until, When, While

- Sentence diagrams can visually show the relationship of the parts of sentences, but they can sometimes be difficult to read. A simplified form of "structuring" is another way to represent a text such as, *"I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Corinthians 1:4).

WORD	ANALYSIS
I	Pronoun (Subject). What noun does this stand for? (Paul)
thank	Verb *(eucharisteo)* = to express gratitude, give thanks, offer a prayer of thanksgiving.
my God	Noun (Object). Literally, "the God of me."

always	<u>Adverb</u> describing the time of the action (whenever Paul was praying).
concerning you	<u>Prepositional</u> phrase *(peri)* describing the object of Paul's thanks to God (the Corinthian believers).
for the grace of God	<u>Prepositional</u> phrase *(epi)* describing what it is about them that Paul thanks God for ("On account of the favors which God has bestowed on you").
which was given you	<u>Adjective</u> phrase describing how they received this grace. Literally, "the given-to-you" [*grace*].
in Christ Jesus	<u>Prepositional</u> phrase *(en)* describing the sphere in which this grace-gift was given to believers.

How to OBSERVE Things in the Language of the Bible

- Most Bible readers do not see things because they do not know what to look for. We learn what to look for by asking the right questions. Questions bring details to our attention.
- Rudyard Kipling's "<u>Six Honest Serving-Men</u>"

I keep six honest serving-men, they taught me all I knew;
Their names are <u>What</u> and <u>Where</u> and <u>When</u> and <u>How</u> and <u>Why</u> and <u>Who</u>.

1. <u>WHAT</u>? Notice the main actions, objects, or ideas being discussed.
2. <u>WHERE</u>? Notice the places or positions being discussed.
3. <u>WHEN</u>? Notice the time references or the order of events.
4. <u>HOW</u>? Notice the way things happen or the qualities of objects.
5. <u>WHY</u>? Notice the reasons or explanations for the actions or ideas.
6. <u>WHO</u>? Notice the main people that are involved or discussed.

- One question may lead to another question. For example, in a study of John 3:2 you might ask <u>WHEN</u>? and see that Nicodemus came to Jesus <u>at night</u>. So you might ask <u>WHY</u> did he come at night?

Resource List for Interpreting Bible Language

General Bible Study Software

1. **e-Sword** = a free Bible study program that has wonderful tools for determining the meaning of biblical words. (<u>http://www.e-Sword.net</u> for free download and updates).
2. **Swordsearcher** = an inexpensive Bible study program, also with good language tools. (<u>http://swordsearcher.com</u> for a free evaluation download).
3. <u>Other Bible study software</u>: costly and usually not as easy to use as e-Sword.

Biblical Word Meanings

(Ranked by level of skill required and by price - least to greatest)

1. <u>Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words</u> (W. E. Vine)
2. <u>The Complete Word Study New Testament</u> (Spiros Zodhiates)
3. <u>Vincent's New Testament Word Studies</u> (Marvin Vincent)
4. <u>Word Pictures in the New Testament</u> (A. T. Robertson)
5. <u>Word Studies in the Greek New Testament</u> (Kenneth Wuest)
6. <u>Word Meanings in the New Testament</u> (Ralph Earle)
7. <u>Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</u> (Joseph Thayer)
8. <u>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</u> (Brown, Driver, & Briggs)
9. <u>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</u> (Harris, Archer, & Waltke)
10. <u>Abridged Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</u> (Kittel & Bromiley)

Complete or Exhaustive Concordances

1. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance (KJV); NIV Exhaustive Concordance (NIV); NAS Exhaustive Concordance (NASB); other concordances by Bible version.
2. Englishman's Greek Concordance & Englishman's Hebrew Concordance (George Wigram)

Endnotes

[1] This is the text of John 3:16 from Y Beibl Cymraeg Newydd (The New Welsh Bible) by The British and Foreign Bible Society, 2004.
[2] A. Berkeley Michelsen, Interpreting the Bible (1963), 114.
[3] Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible (1992), 110.
[4] McQuilkin, 114.